

ART AND PROPAGANDA: THE
DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION

By

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Introduction

On the morning of July 19, 1937, hundreds of Germans lined up outside the Hofgarten wing of the Residenz on Galeriestrasse 4 in Munich, Germany.¹ The building had previously housed a collection of ancient plaster casts, preserved by the Archäologisches Institute (Archeological Institute), but on that day a new exhibition opened its doors. It was called the “Entartete Kunst,” or “Degenerate Art,” exhibition and it had—and still has--the distinction of being the largest modern art exhibition ever staged. 650 works went on display, representing 112 of Europe’s most important modern artists. Although a majority of the artists were German, the exhibit also included several Eastern European artists and one American, Lyonel Feiniger.² Many of these artists, such as Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Emil Nolde, Georg Grosz and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner are still included among the most influential painters and sculptors of the twentieth century.

The Degenerate Art exhibition unlike anything the world had ever seen. Most art exhibitions are organized as a celebration of human beings and their creative accomplishments, but the Degenerate Art exhibition was not a celebration. Rather, it was a forum for the Nazis to ridicule and condemn works by artists they perceived as enemies of the state. They used the exhibit as a propaganda tool, and while some members of the public may have come to pay a final tribute to the artists who once stood at the pinnacle of the German art world, a majority of the visitors came to scorn what the exhibit’s organizers claimed were the excesses and distortions of this type of

¹ Stephanie Barron, ed. *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, (Los Angeles, CA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: H.N. Abrams, 1991) 45.

² Barron, 9.

art. One visitor to the exhibit wished the artists themselves had been “tied up next to their pictures, so that every German can spit in their faces.”³ The exhibition’s organizer, Alfred Ziegler, said in a speech given on opening day,

All around us you see the monstrous offspring of insanity, impudence, ineptitude, and sheer degeneracy. What this exhibition offers inspires horror and disgust in all of us.⁴

Over the next three months, the exhibition attracted over three million visitors. They walked through seven cramped rooms, covered from floor to ceiling with works of art. The paintings were hung on top of beautiful murals that had originally decorated the interior of the building, or on temporary walls that were put up in front of windows. Some works were hung unframed with thumbtacks and others were purposely displayed upside down and crooked. Little attention was paid to identifying the artist, title, date and provenance of the individual works correctly. Propagandistic slogans were also painted on the wall, such as “The cultural Bolsheviks order of Battle,” “Nature as seen by sick minds,” and “Revelations of the Jewish Racial Soul.”⁵ Relevant quotes from Nazi leaders covered the walls, such as this one from Hitler, given at a party rally in 1933:

In the field of culture, as elsewhere, the National Socialist movement and government must not permit incompetents and charlatans suddenly to change sides and enlist under the banner of the new state as if nothing had happened...One thing is certain: under no circumstances will we allow the representatives of the decadence that lies behind us suddenly to emerge as the standard bearers of the future.⁶

³ Kay M. Flavell, George Grosz: A Biography (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) 173.

⁴ Barron, 45.

⁵ Barron, 46.

⁶ Barron, 53.

Quotes from the artists themselves were also included. The Nazis took them out of context and twisted them to suit their purposes, like artist Georg Grosz's proclamation, " 'Take Dada seriously! It's worth it!' " ⁷ An exhibition guide was published that visitors could purchase and take home as a reminder of the Nazis' message. The title of the brochure was written *Entartete "Kunst,"* with *Kunst* written in red and printed to look like crayon, revealing that the Nazis questioned whether the works exhibited were even art. Everything was done to make it clear to the public that the Nazi regime had no respect for these artists or their accomplishments.

When the exhibition closed, many of the pieces were packed up and sent to various cities around Germany and Austria as part of a tour organized to educate the rest of the German-speaking population. Degenerate Art exhibitions continued until 1941, attracting two million more visitors. Many of the works were eventually sold at auction, while others were burned, much like condemned books, or destroyed in the Allied bombings of storage facilities. Many of these masterpieces were never seen again, and forty years of German artistic achievement were lost forever.

Scholars have primarily approached the Degenerate Art exhibition as part of a larger political phenomenon. Historians, such as Jonathan Petropoulos, author of *Art As Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), have focused on the exhibition as part of the Nazi's larger political campaign against modern art and modernism. Petropoulos offers an invaluable source of information about the Nazis' use of art and artistic policy in their political campaign. He focuses heavily on the cultural bureaucracy that the Nazis built, the rivalry between important cultural leaders, and the plundering campaigns that the Nazis executed throughout Europe during the war years.

⁷Barron, 57

However, he does not examine how trends in art itself may have shaped the Nazi's propaganda practices and their effectiveness. He only briefly mentions the Degenerate Art exhibition, focusing on the event as a sign that Nazi cultural policy was becoming more radical and on the propaganda techniques used to attract visitors to the exhibit. However, he fails to examine what kind of role the art played in the exhibition, which seems critical, because although the Nazis had political motives, it was still an art exhibition.

Art historians, like Shearer West, author of *The Visual Arts in Germany, 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair* (2001), have analyzed the trends in art history that surrounded the development of modernism. West describes the destruction of the academic system and the formation of splinter groups, called secessions, which were seeking more artistic freedom. Members of these secessions and their followers became involved in the formation of the various movements that came to be associated with modernism, like Expressionism and Dada. West's study concludes with the Nazi's rise to power. She discusses the intellectuals who influenced the Nazi's anti-modernist ideology and the development of their cultural policy. She explains also how trends in art history shaped the development of approved art and the selection of pieces for the Great German Art exhibitions. However, she does not discuss the impact of art history on the Degenerate Art exhibition.

This study will examine the Degenerate Art exhibit from a different perspective, which analyzing the Nazi regime's use, or misuse, of art as a tool of political propaganda. The exhibit was both a political event and an artistic event, and it is important to acknowledge the trends in art history that played a significant role in

the creation of the exhibit and the public's reaction to it, as well as the political dimensions of the exhibit. The effectiveness of the exhibition as both a cultural event and a piece of political propaganda lay in the fact that it employed the public's unsettled attitude toward modern art as a vehicle for conveying the Nazi regime's political, racial and cultural ideology. By linking their political accusations with the public's unease about these themes and the popular distrust and misunderstanding of modern and abstract art, and contrasting the "degeneracy" of modern art with the comfortable themes and familiar styles of "approved" art, the Nazis were able to deliver their political message to a level within German society and within the German's psyche in ways that were not available to them through more conventional means of political discourse. Consequently, the Degenerate Art exhibition proved to be popular and, from the Nazis' perspective, a successful experiment in cultural propaganda.

The Nazi officials who organized the Degenerate Art exhibition leveled both political and cultural accusations against the artists whose work they condemned. The dominant political criticism was that the primary political enemies and victims of the Nazi regime--the Jews and the communists--influenced these artists and their work. Condemnation of these groups was a mainstay of Nazi political propaganda in speeches, newspaper articles, newsreels, and pamphlets. These two groups were accused of having contributed heavily to Germany's loss in World War I and to the economic and political turmoil that plagued the Weimar Republic. In their efforts to eliminate the influence of Jews and communists, and their potential allies throughout German society, as political obstacles to the regime, the Nazi propaganda apparatus

coupled their political condemnation with cultural condemnation. Instead of relying on speeches and texts to express their accusations, the regime linked their political message to their condemnation of modernism, including modern artists, whose choice of themes and artistic style had been creating controversy in Germany (and elsewhere in Europe) since the turn of the twentieth century.

People were uncomfortable with modern art and modern artists, not necessarily because they feared them politically, but because the themes the artists chose to depict in their artwork were disturbing. Modern art commented on and depicted unsettling changes and events that were taking place in German society. It questioned the depiction of women and World War I. Artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Mueller painted images of women that depicted them differently from what was common in traditional art and acceptable in early twentieth century Germany. Portrayals of World War I and defeated German soldiers were also difficult and controversial. Many of the modern artists, such as Otto Dix, emerged from the war years having embraced pacifism and their images of World War I were highly disturbing and far from heroic.

In addition to the controversy surrounding the themes of modern art, the Degenerate Art exhibition also capitalized on the public's reluctance to accept the artistic styles adopted by modern artists. Modern artists were depicting external and internal reality through the creation of impressionistic, expressionistic and abstract works of art. Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee were two of the artists included in the Degenerate Art exhibition who experimented with abstraction. To average Germans, their works appeared complicated and confusing. They were in sharp

contrast to more highly naturalistic genre and landscape painting that had dominated the German art scene in the nineteenth century and continued to dominate popular taste in art well into the twentieth century. Viewing them created a feeling in the public mind of unease that the Nazis exploited for their own purposes by using chaotic exhibition techniques and painting slogans, such as “Nature as seen through sick minds” and “Madness becomes method” on the exhibition walls.⁸ They sought to make the German public believe that these types of artworks were associated with unstable, degenerate minds, and that the artists who created these works were enemies of the state and the German people.

While many foreign artists, especially those of Eastern European and/or Jewish heritage, found themselves condemned by the Nazis because they were seen as inferior and members of an international communist conspiracy, the influence of non-Western styles and subject matter on German artists, such as Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein, was also attacked. Africans, Polynesians, and Gypsies had served as models for many modern artists, who became involved in the primitivism movement, while most people, including the Nazis looked down upon these groups as primitive and dangerous. The Nazis saw them as racially inferior and felt that it was not fitting for a German artist of superior Aryan racial background to look to these people for inspiration. Embracing these “Stone Age” cultures might undermine the progress that German culture had made. They hung their works under signs that read, for example, “The Jewish longing for the wilderness reveals itself-in Germany the Negro becomes the racial ideal of degenerate art.”⁹

⁸ Barron, 46.

⁹ Barron, 46.

In addition to holding exhibitions condemning art that they disapproved of, the Nazis also developed and nurtured artists who had progressed in opposition to modern art over the preceding decades. They formulated unwritten standards of approved expression and held annual Great German Art Exhibitions at the newly built House of German Art in Munich from 1937 to 1944, across the street from where the building where the Degenerate Art exhibition was held. The art on display at these exhibitions was not unnerving to the public, the themes were not controversial, the style was primarily realistic and there was little if any noticeable foreign influence. The approved artists did not invent anything new, instead they merely “appropriated long-standing popular tradition and taste.”¹⁰

This study will consist of three main chapters each involving a discussion of the three main reasons that the Degenerate Art exhibition was an effective experiment in cultural propaganda. Chapter one will involve a discussion of how the exhibition tapped into many German’ sense of discomfort with the themes that modern artists chose to depict, such as changing views on women and Germany’s fault in World War I. The second chapter will examine the popular unwillingness to accept modern art’s non-naturalistic styles, like Impressionism, Expressionism, and abstraction as valid methods to depict internal reality and the way in which the Nazis capitalized on this in the exhibition. Finally, chapter three involves the Nazis portrayal of modern art as foreign and un-German and the roots behind Germany’s unwillingness to accept non-Western styles and themes.

¹⁰ Barron, 25.

Since previous scholarship has limited its focus on the exhibition to its political importance, the art that hung on the wall has not received a great deal of attention. In this paper, however, a number of paintings from the exhibit are reproduced and analyzed. In part, this is because there are few eyewitness accounts, with exception of those by Peter Guenther and Paul Ortwin Rave, available from the German public to describe their feelings walking through the exhibition. More importantly, however, the use of specific images will be crucial in an analysis of the effectiveness of the exhibit. Viewing examples of works seen by the Germans who visited the Degenerate Art exhibition, such as Otto Dix's disturbing images of World War I, contributes to an understanding of what images may have made them uncomfortable and susceptible to the Nazi regime's political messages. Examples of approved art will also be included to show how the Nazis advocated portraying women, urbanization, and World War I. In addition, the controversy surrounding the depiction of external and internal realities is more readily understood when images of the abstract art that might have disturbed the public is juxtaposed with the more realistic and traditional works that the Nazis were advocating. Images by foreign artists included in the exhibit also show the effect these artists had on German artists who were influenced by these foreign masters or chose to draw inspiration from foreign subject matter.

Chapter One

Women and War

Many modern artists chose to incorporate the dramatic societal changes that had taken place in German society since unification in 1871 as subjects and themes in their art. Although the works of art in the Degenerate Art exhibition addressed a number of themes, the modern artists condemned in the exhibit focused on two themes in particular to depict this “inner war”: the changing roles of men and women in society and the moral bankruptcy of traditional German militarism. The particular focus on these two sensitive developments in German society contributed to the German public’s attitude of discomfort and uneasiness towards modern art. The Nazis capitalized on these feelings when they put together the Degenerate Art exhibition by selecting paintings that were visually and thematically disturbing, and contrasting them with State-approved depictions of traditional themes and conventional images that were exhibited at the Great German Art exhibition across the street.

Images of women painted by modern artists on display at the Degenerate Art exhibition were very different from what was common in traditional art and acceptable in the 19th and early 20th century. The Nazis criticized the paintings for presenting images of women that were immoral and overtly sexual. The women modern artists painted were not respectable members of society. Often, they were prostitutes. They were in sharp contrast to images of women painted by Adolf Wissel, Karl Alexander Flügel, Leopold Schmutzlen, and Fritz Machensen, who were depicted working in fields, taking care of their children, or praying in a church, that

were beloved by the art establishment and by the public during the 19th century and that gained approval under Hitler.

Modern artists, and all German citizens, were deeply affected by the outcome of the First World War. It left the political and economic systems in tatters and the country demoralized. Some modern artists chose to continue with their work as they had before the war, while others dedicated their careers to promoting anti-war messages in their artwork. These anti-war artists created images of death, disease and destruction, and spoke out through their art against the effects of war on soldiers in the trenches and on life on the home front during and after the conflict, shocking and offending many Germans. The Nazis, on the other hand, heavily promoted the heroic portrayal of soldiers in approved art, incorporating works by those who ignored themes of suffering and instead depicted war “as a battle for the salvation of German culture.”¹¹ Soldiers were depicted, as heroes even in death, not mangled bodies in trenches or amputees on the streets.

How to Depict a German Woman:

The mission of a woman is to be beautiful...The female bird pretties herself for her mate and hatches the eggs for him. In exchange the mate takes care of gathering the food, stands guard, and wards off the enemy. (Joseph Goebbels, *Michael: Ein Deutsches Schicksal*, 1929)¹²

In the Degenerate Art exhibition, the Nazis condemned several modern artists for the way in which they chose to portray German women. In room three of the exhibition, under the slogans “An insult to German womanhood” and “Ideal Cretin and Whore,” works by the artists Karl Hofer, Paul Kleinschmidt, Max Beckmann,

¹¹ Peter Adam, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992) 158.

¹² Joseph Goebbels, *Michael: ein deutsches schicksal im tageblättern* (Munich: F. Eber nachf., 1937) 41.

Max Ernst, Karel Niestrath, Heinrich Hoerle, Otto Mueller, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner were displayed.¹³ There were other works of art depicting women throughout the exhibition by these eight artists and others, such as Otto Dix and Karel Schmidt-Rottluff, but they were not hung under slogans condemning them for falsely portraying women, most likely because the curators abandoned thematic organization techniques in the last rooms.

With few exceptions, these works depict women in ways that were disturbing to the public. The women are depicted as dressed in the flamboyant costumes of prostitutes and dancers, like Paul Kleinschmidt's "Duett im Nordcafe" (Duet at the North Café) and numerous works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The sexuality of the women is frequently overt especially in paintings such as Karl Hofer's "Sitzender Akt auf blauem Kissen" (Seated nude on blue cushion) and Otto Mueller's paintings of nude Gypsy women.

The Degenerate Art exhibition included thirty-two paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who had been a founding member of the group *Die Brücke*, one of the first prominent modern art groups in Germany. The group had originated in Dresden, but soon moved to Berlin, where Kirchner took an interest in painting scenes of city life and became one of the most important German Expressionist artists.¹⁴ Many of his paintings in the Degenerate Art exhibition depicted female prostitutes and dancers, including "Gelbe Tänzerin" (Yellow Dancer, see fig. 1), which was painted in 1913. The painting was displayed prominently in room three and also included in the exhibition's catalog, under the heading "The prostitute is extolled as the moral

¹³ Barron, 56-57.

¹⁴ West, 48, 52.

ideal.”¹⁵ Although only black and white photographs of the image are available today, one can assume after looking at other similar paintings by Kirchner that the yellow dancer’s clothes are most likely brightly colored and the amount of paint applied to the face gives the appearance of thick makeup, probably bright red lips and blue-gray eye shadow. She is shown overdressed in a large feather hat, kicking her legs up to reveal her undergarments. The dancer is flamboyant and overtly sexual, out to attract attention. Kirchner wanted his women to appear superficial and theatrical. He also was making a statement about bourgeois, urban life. He wanted to make people anxious by purposefully questioning conventions, preconceptions and morality in the early twentieth century, as did a majority of artists involved in modern art.

Visitors to the Degenerate Art exhibition would have most likely been a little embarrassed or even repulsed by the “Gelbe Tänzerin.” A viewer’s eyes are drawn to her hand in the center of the painting. This hand is in the process of lifting up the dancer’s skirt to reveal her garments and her legs are spread wide open. The women’s eyes do not engage the spectator, but her spread legs do. Her eyes may be focused on something off to the right, but her legs are open, making the area between her legs the center of the painting and the focus of the viewer’s attention.

The exhibition also included several paintings of women by Otto Dix. While Dix is best known for his images of war, he also created a great deal of notoriety in the 1920s over his portrayal of women. His painting “Das Mädchen vor dem Spiegel” (Girl in front of the mirror), which was first exhibited in Berlin in 1923, was

¹⁵ Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP Kulturamt, Führer durch die Ausstellung Entartete Kunst (Redding, Connecticut: Silver Fox Press, 1972) 16.

attacked for its condemnation of bourgeois society, because it contained “grotesque erotic imagery” and depicted “sexual perversion.”¹⁶ He was indicted on moral charges and brought to trial for exhibiting obscene pictures.¹⁷ He was acquitted, thanks to the help of other artists testifying on his behalf, but the controversy no doubt garnered attention from the public and influenced the Nazi’s decision to include several of his works depicting women. “Das Mädchen vor dem Spiegel” was not included in the Degenerate Art exhibition, but one work, “Lustmord” (Sex Murder, see fig. 2), could also be described as grotesque and erotic, and would have no doubt elicited similar responses.

“Gelbe Tänzerin” and “Lustmord” are certainly very different from the portraits of women that came before them and that continued to be produced by academy painters, like Wilhelm Liebl’s. His work was in sharp contrast to early modernists, and he became very popular as the “peasant painter.”¹⁸ His painting, “Three Women in Church,” (see fig. 3) which was painted in 1879-1882, was included as an example of approved art in the Great German Art exhibition.¹⁹ It depicts three women, two of whom are reading the Bible, while the other is praying. They are wearing long dresses, scarves and hats covering their heads. Their faces do not appear to be covered by any makeup, the contours of the female body are not visible. They are very simple women at prayer.

This painting, when shown at the Great German Art exhibition, would have been intended to elicit a dramatic reaction from the viewer. The exhibitions focused

¹⁶ Barron, 224.

¹⁷ Barron, 224.

¹⁸ West, 37.

¹⁹ Adam, 111.

on “turning away from pessimistic negation and abstraction and the return to a simple world and to humanity.”²⁰ Liebl’s painting “Three Women in Church” would have definitely reminded the German public of the simple world. These women are quiet, reverent and familiar. They are nineteenth-century women, but they would have also reminded many Germans of women in rural areas. These women could have been the viewer’s grandmothers.

The Nazis included artists like Wilhelm Liebl in the approved art exhibit because they best represented the traditional values that the Nazis wanted to propagate, whereas modern artists, like Kirchner and Dix, questioned these values. The Nazis wanted portrayals of women to be representative of their role in society, which was confined by them to “Kinder, Küche, [und] Kirche” (children, kitchen and church).²¹ They also promoted depictions of German womanhood that met the racial standards of a true German woman as tall, blonde, and blue-eyed. “Artists [should] stress above all else the role of mother as the guardian of life...to show the healthy physical being, the biological value of the individual,”²² and not portray them as having any sexuality of their own. Portraits of women were very common features of approved art. The portraits depicted proper Nazi women, such as the wives of important government leaders and they were in “demur and ladylike poses,”²³ but the women have little individuality. Approved art also featured female nudes that were stereotypes of healthy German women. Many of the paintings of nudes show women in their homes, but they do not engage themselves with the spectator. Like in Hofer’s

²⁰ Adam, 110.

²¹ Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation: A History of Germany 1918-1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 78.

²² Adam, 110.

²³ Adam, 155.

“Sitzender Akt,” they are depicted in the private settings, going about their daily activities, such as dressing themselves. Art historian Peter Adam says that female nudes, showing the “human figure without conflict or suffering were immensely popular” in traditional German art of the early 20th century.²⁴

Women in German society were comfortable being presented in these ways for the most part. Political emancipation had been achieved during the Weimar Republic and the image of the emancipated woman was popularized, but women did not embrace this image. According to historian Mary Fulbrook, only a small minority adopted the emancipated style that bares resemblance to the paintings that Kirchner had done several years earlier of women, “...smoking cigarettes in long holders, cutting their hair in short fashions, driving cars and indulging in apparently glittering night life.”²⁵ Many women preferred to be housewives, if financially possible, and along with men, these traditionalist women criticized the modern artists’ depictions of women. Those who visited the Degenerate Art exhibition could not relate to the images of women in front of them. They represented a kind of German woman that a majority of the society felt uncomfortable about. They were disrupting the status quo and therefore it was difficult for average Germans to embrace. The Nazis used this discomfort to their advantage if they showed the visitors that it was the modern artists who had embraced these emancipated women, regardless of their motivations for doing so, the Nazis could justify their condemnation of modern artists and their patrons.

²⁴ Adam, 152.

²⁵ Fulbrook, 42.

How to depict a German soldier

...The intention is manifest: the viewer is meant to see the soldier either as a murderer or a victim...Above all, people are to be deprived of their profound reverence for all the military virtues: valor, fortitude, and readiness for combat. And so, in the drawings for this section, alongside caricatures of war cripples expressly designed to arouse repulsion and views of mass graves delineated every refinement of detail. We see German soldiers represented as simpletons, vile erotic wastrels, and drunkards. That not just Jews but “artists” of German blood could produce such botched and contemptible works, in which they gratuitously reaffirmed our enemies’ war atrocity propaganda--already unmasked at the time as a tissue of lies--will forever remain a blot in the history of German culture.²⁶

In *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism*, Walter Grasskamp writes that the First World War could have reintegrated German artists into a concrete German identity.²⁷ It could have healed the tensions that had developed following the Secession movements and brought avant-garde artists back into the mainstream of society. Many modern artists volunteered to fight for Germany. Despite their participation in European cultural community, some still believed that German culture was indeed superior to the other nations of Europe, or at least attempted to perform their patriotic duty despite their affinities for French and British culture.²⁸ Ernst Barlach and Franz Marc also saw war as a possibility for catharsis, to rid Germany of the hypocrisy and materialism that they saw in modern life.²⁹

However, when they came home, they were members of a defeated army that had lost over 1.6 million soldiers and seen another four million wounded. Several

²⁶ Reichspropagandaleitung, 12-14.

²⁷ Walter Grasskamp, *The divided heritage: themes and problems in German modernism* ed. Irit Rogoff. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 16.

²⁸ Paret, 134-135.

²⁹ Paret, 135.

suffered nervous breakdowns and, like all Germans, they had to deal with the effects of the Versailles Treaty that forced the country to accept full responsibility for the war, both politically and financially, and made rebuilding the country extremely difficult. Depicting Germany's defeat and humiliation in art was a difficult issue. Many Germans did not want to accept defeat, and myths that internal enemies, like Jews and communists, had stabbed the German people in the back were common. They wanted to continue to believe in German superiority and the influence of militarism was not easy to erase.

There were those within the modern art community who had been deeply changed by their experiences on the battlefield and the home front. Artists such as Ernst Barlach, Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, and Karel Niestrath could not ignore what they had seen and return to the themes that may have dominated their pre-war art. They wanted to create art that helped them deal with their feelings about what they had seen and done on the battlefield and/or make a statement about war and militarism through images that showed its devastating effects on and off the battlefield. These artists created great controversy in Germany throughout the twenties and when the Nazis came to power, they were condemned in the Degenerate Art exhibition and their works were displayed under the slogans, "Deliberate sabotage of national defense" and "An Insult to the German heroes of the Great War."³⁰

The sculptor Ernst Barlach's piece "Christus and Johannes" (Christ and John) was included in the Degenerate Art exhibition because the Nazis believed that his work contained "...pacifist--some said defeatist--themes, which were considered an

³⁰ Barron, 46, 56.

insult to the German spirit...”³¹ Barlach was not new to controversy. Several war memorials that he had sculpted during the Weimar Republic had also received negative attention from the public. Barlach used sculpture to deal “with the tragic reality of war and his own traits of violence, empathy, and sorrow, which had responded to war.”³² He chose to sculpt memorials that condemned the war, rather than depict a heroic soldier or battle scene, because his own experiences on the battlefield and on the home front had turned him into a committed pacifist. According to Peter Paret, this offended not only National Socialists, but also large numbers of political moderates in Germany.³³

Georg Grosz considered it his duty to depict the victims of the First World War, the disabled, crippled, and mutilated.³⁴ He also undoubtedly questioned some of the causes of the war, like imperialism, militarism and nationalism. He was one of the most outspoken and controversial German artists, a committed communist and member of avant-garde movements, such as Dada. The Nazis included twenty works of his works in the Degenerate Art exhibition, three of which had anti-war and anti-imperialist messages, “Strassenszene mit Krüppel” (Street Scene with Cripples), “Gefangene” (Prisoners), and “Maul Halten und weiterdienen” (Shut up and do your duty, see fig. 4). Of the three anti-war images, “Maul Halten und weiterdienen” had probably received the most attention. Its depiction of Christ in a gas mask being crucified on the cross first appeared in the portfolio *Hintergrund* (Background) in

³¹ Barron, 197.

³² Paret, 184.

³³ Paret, 174.

³⁴ Barron, 242.

1928 and sparked public outrage.³⁵ Grosz and his friend Wieland Herzfelde were subsequently convicted of blasphemy and sacrilege. They were initially fined two thousand Reichsmark each, but a sympathetic judge overturned the conviction on appeal.³⁶ Grosz's communist connections and his self-appointed role as "a propagandist of the social revolution"³⁷ unnerved those who believed that communists had played a role in Germany's defeat in the First World War. The image of Christ wearing a gas mask would have also undoubtedly disturbed Christians in Germany, who might not have understood or accepted his political message, and offended many who had supported Germany's actions in the First World War.

After Otto Dix returned from the battlefields of World War I, he dedicated his life to illustrating "the daily life of the soldier and the horrors of war." Dagmar Grimm wrote that Dix was attempting to create "...objective documentation of the war [that] undermined the German idea of heroism. It destroyed the naïve illusions of his country, whose misguided belief in an honorable death for the fatherland failed to raise the reality of that death into account."³⁸ The Nazis displayed twenty-six of Otto Dix's drawings and paintings at the Degenerate Art exhibition, at least four of them showed the horrors of war, and like his depictions of women, they had been applauded by some and hated by others. The Nazis accused him of single-handedly making a deliberate attempt to sabotage German national defense in the exhibition's

³⁵ John I.H. Baur, George Grosz (New York: Macmillan, 1954) 22.

³⁶ Baur, 22.

³⁷ Barron, 242.

³⁸ Barron, 224-226.

brochure and his drawings were indicted as offending “the moral feeling of the German people in the gravest way.”³⁹

“Der Schützengraben” (The Trench, see fig. 5) was one of the two most controversial of Dix’s works on display in the Degenerate Art exhibition. “Der Schützengraben” had first been displayed in 1924 at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne. However, the drawing had to be removed soon after, because of the intense public outcry that erupted. The mayor of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer, who later became chancellor of West Germany, asked that it be removed and the museum’s director was forced to step down.⁴⁰ It is a triptych, known as the “Der Krieg” (War), that shows the devastation and misery of the battlefields that Dix probably witnessed himself as a soldier, although only the center panel was displayed at the exhibition. The left panel of “Der Krieg” shows soldiers marching off to war, while the centerpiece shows destroyed houses and decomposing corpses, and the right panel shows soldiers struggling home. The centerpiece is especially gruesome. In addition to the destroyed village, splintered trees and body parts cover the foreground. In the upper right corner, a soldier’s bare legs can be seen sticking out.

A visitor at the Degenerate Art exhibition would have been shocked by the dramatic white paint used to draw their eyes to the legs. Individual bullet holes with blood spurting out of them are visible and left foot has been partly blown off. The blanket below the legs covered the rest of the soldier’s upper body, with only the head sticking out, mouth gaped open at the bottom of the image, but bullet holes in the blanket remind the viewer that the rest of the man’s body was not spared. His gun is

³⁹ Fritz Löffler, *Otto Dix: Life and Work*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982) 62.

⁴⁰ Barron, 227.

still propped up next to him. On the bottom left of the canvas, a sitting soldier is visible, but his face is covered by a gas mask, making it difficult to determine whether he is dead or alive. In the top left corner, a corpse impaled on twisted steel bars is also visible. At first glance it is difficult to determine that it is indeed a person and not just debris hanging from the bars, but upon closer look, visitors to the exhibition would have been able to make out a boot in the far left and mangled head in the top center of the painting. On the right side of the painting, the sky is completely black and one can see that it is slowly moving over the entire landscape. Smoke still seems to be rising over the destruction in the distance. These images were too graphic for an audience who preferred to think of their soldiers dying honorable deaths, not rotting away in trenches.

One of the most famous war artists at the Great German Art Exhibitions was Elk Eber. He was known for his glorification of war in the 1920s, such as “World War I Soldier,” (see fig. 6) which is obviously very different from images created by Grosz, Barlach and Dix.⁴¹ This soldier is not suffering, he is handsome, his uniform is clean, no sign of blood or injury. He is in motion, loading his gun and looking with determination at the action in the distance. His face is confident, there is no fear in his face. He is ready to take on the enemy once his weapon is loaded. Elk became one of Hitler’s favorite artists and his works were used as examples for artists who worked as official war photographers for the Nazi regime. From Eber and the Nazi leaders, these artists learned that German soldiers should always be portrayed in scenes of glorious victory and not agonizing defeat. These works were to display “a

⁴¹ West, 202.

gentle war, of blonde nurses, comradeship, and friendly faces...not a picture of blood and tears, of gangrene and death.”⁴²

Nazi approved-art, whether it showed a soldier in the midst of battle, or on a farm, was intended to take people out of reality and into a dream world, especially as World War II approached. The Nazis needed visitors to the Great German Art exhibition to see images that might inspire them to participate and also take their minds off the problems to come. They included works by artists like Eber and also pictures of great battles from Germany’s past to recall the country’s history of militarism. They needed to show positive imagery of war because its horrors had not been forgotten. The First World War was not ancient history for the German population. The anti-war images were not useful. The images and the artists that created them were a threat to their position. They felt that the best way to denounce them would be to single them out and remind the German population of how they felt when these images first went on display. They did not want their soldiers shown in such a way, regardless of the political or ideological message that accompanied it.

In a time of great changes throughout German society, modern artists chose not only to create beautiful art, but also to comment on the problems of these tumultuous times, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s depictions of female prostitutes as examples of the superficiality of bourgeois society and Otto Dix’s violent images of the First World War. However, many members of the public did not understand or agree with these men and others like them, they created controversy and discomfort among the German public.

⁴² Adam, 165.

When the Nazis organized the Degenerate Art exhibition, they selected artists who violated popular ideas about how certain themes were to be portrayed. They had to condemn artists whose depictions of women showed them outside their designated roles as racially pure mothers and housekeepers. In a state organizing for war, images of the horrors of the First World War, or any war, could not be tolerated. They needed to remind people that to be a soldier was to be a hero and to die in battle for the fatherland would be an honor. However, simply telling the visitor through slogans and quotes, or by juxtaposing them with approved art images across the street was not enough.

The Nazis also chose the most controversial examples of modern art, works had already created controversy in the past and/or would elicit strong reactions from visitors. Many people would have heard about Otto Dix being tried “for the dissemination of obscene pictures”⁴³ of women or having his anti-war images removed from a museum in Cologne by the city’s mayor. Georg Grosz’s image of Christ wearing a gas mask had also resulted in legal recourse against the artists and many of the three million Germans who attended the Degenerate Art exhibition, even people who did not regularly followed art, probably would have had some exposure to these controversies prior to bein

Nazis counted on people to be familiar with these controversial artists. They capitalized on people's nervousness about the changing ways a woman could be presented and the humiliation and betrayal that Germans felt following the First World War. They also used the gut reactions that people would have had to these images to their advantage.

Chapter Two

Abstract and Expressionistic

Anybody who paints and sees the sky green and
the pastures blue ought to be sterilized.⁴⁴

Many modern artists who chose to depict external and internal reality by experimenting with expressionism and/or abstraction bore the brunt of the Nazis criticism in the Degenerate Art exhibition. The Nazis wanted to use art to convey their political, racial and cultural ideology. They wanted to create the illusion through art that the German people had reached a consensus on cultural issues, following the chaos of the Weimar Republic. It was easy for the Nazis to condemn works of art that had an obvious theme or subject matter, like Otto Dix's anti-war paintings. Many expressionist works of art could not be condemned based on subject matter alone, however, and abstract works did not have any discernible subject matter, themes, or even symbols to incorporate or discredit. Therefore, they condemned Expressionist and abstract art across the board. They compared Expressionist and abstract images in the Degenerate Art exhibition with approved art in the Great German Art exhibit that was representational and that promoted favored emotions, such as patriotism. This type of art had dominated the 19th century and was acceptable to the public, while expressionist art was seen as too emotional and abstract art as devoid of any emotion and often incomprehensible.

Works of art by Expressionist artists dominated the Degenerate Art exhibition. Some of these artists, such as Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, were singled out for the themes and subject matter that they chose to depict in their works. Other

⁴⁴ Quote from Adolf Hitler. Cited in: Michael Delahunt. "Expressionism" *ArtLex*. (21 March 2003)
<<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/Expressionism.html>>

artists, however, were included in the Degenerate Art exhibition not because their subject matter or themes were objectionable to the Nazis--they painted landscapes and portraits as did approved artists--but because the style that they chose to use had been deemed unacceptable by the Nazis. Expressionist artists were not as concerned with accurately presenting objective reality, but rather with the emotional content of their reality. They wanted to share with the audience the feelings that they associated with the subject matter or event shown in the painting, which often meant forgoing more realistic interpretations. The Nazis, on the other hand, insisted that all art had to be representational and easily understood by the masses. In a landscape, for example, one could not just draw a green line and call it a tree. The artists needed to include the branches, the leaves, the trunk and all of the characteristics that one identifies with a tree. They should conform to the nineteenth century conventions of realism, which called for a portrayal of subject matter that seemed realistic, but was also highly idealized.

Many Expressionist artists also became interested in abstraction. They created works that did not have an obvious subject matter or even any recognizable symbols. Influenced by Expressionist ideas, theosophy and other late nineteenth century artistic movements, such as Impressionism, Jugendstil, and Symbolism, as well as theology and anti-materialistic ideas, abstract artists felt that representational works could not accurately express an artist's inner character and feelings. Kandinsky and other artists felt that to truthfully represent their inner feelings, works of art should be divested "of as much material baggage as possible."⁴⁵ There were also some subjects and themes that they considered beyond objective description,

⁴⁵ West, 74.

such as spirituality. These works of art could not be used to promote the policies of National Socialism. They did not express ideas about the role of women or illustrate the role of the heroic German society in protecting civilization. Therefore, the Nazis condemned the artists as delusional and crazy. They were described as madmen who hid their evil intentions in these incomprehensible works. The Nazi propagandists worked tirelessly to promote realistic artwork, and also juxtaposed abstract painting and sculpture in the Degenerate Art exhibit with the work of the mentally insane to undermine the legitimacy of these talented modern artists.

Expressionism

In the Degenerate Art exhibition, the Nazis condemned all of the artists who identified themselves with Expressionism or who were included within the movement. These artists included Otto Dix, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Ernst Barlach, who have been discussed previously, and almost all of the remaining 109 artists on display at the exhibition. Some of the most notable Expressionists in the exhibit (many of whom were also abstract artists) included Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Erich Heckel, Conrad Felixmüller, Otto Mueller, Max Pechstein, Heinrich Campendonk, and Oskar Kokoschka. Basically, the Nazis condemned any and all artists who had been associated with the two pioneering Expressionist groups, *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*. They placed their works in rooms with slogans such as “Nature as seen through sick minds,” “Madness becomes method,” and “Crazy at any price.”⁴⁶

Expressionism has been defined as an artistic style in which objective reality is not the focus, but instead the artist attempts to express the emotions that are

⁴⁶ Barron, 46.

associated with objects or events. Franz Roh writes, “We find in Expressionism the urge to attain a powerful statement from within, made by a creator who reforms and opposes the pressure of nature.”⁴⁷ Expressionist art is characterized by the use of bright colors and experimentation with colors that one might identify with the actual subject or event in reality. Shapes are distorted and exaggerated, for example people’s heads are often depicted larger than the rest of the body or oblong, instead of anatomically correct and proportional, like in the works of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, especially “Drei am Tisch” (Three at a table). Many of the themes and subject matter treated by the Expressionists were not very different from approved art, or at least those who did not chose to use art to comment on problems in society and Expressionism was also seen as one of the first truly German artistic movements. Some Nazis, like Joseph Goebbels, even argued early on that Expressionism should be included and celebrated as an approved form of art. However, it was decided in the early years of the Third Reich that these works were confusing to the public,

...Fascism did not address its propaganda to the young, the educated and the refined ‘connoisseurs d’ art’...it addressed its propaganda to the masses and for its purpose a totally new brand of artistic style was required.⁴⁸

The Expressionists’ messages were obscured by the deviation from objective reality and their appearance made them even more intense and disturbing. They did not offer a clear and concise message accessible to the masses. Images of brave soldiers, heroic government leaders, pious women and lush-landscapes offered understandable models to express Nazi ideology and societal expectations.

⁴⁷ Roh, 52.

⁴⁸ Grasskamp, 19.

Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka was hesitant to associate himself with the Expressionist movement, or any movement for that matter, but in his portraiture, he certainly seemed to be promoting many of their ideas about how people should be presented on canvas. He described his ideas about portraiture in his autobiography:

When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person -- the signs of his clerical or secular eminence or his social origins. It is the business of history to transmit documents on such matters as posterity. What used to shock people in my portraits was that I tried to intuit from the face, from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person, and recreate in my own pictorial language the distillation of a living being that would survive in memory.⁴⁹

His paintings revealed exposed the bones, blood vessels, and tendons through the use of color, creating works that according to Shearer West “make statements about those individuals he chose to represent.”⁵⁰ The Nazis, however, disagreed with the way in which Kokoschka and other Expressionists depicted people. They included eleven of his works in the Degenerate Art exhibition, including four portraits, “Alter Herr,” (Old Man, see fig. 7) “Bildnis der Herzogin von Montesquieu,” (Portrait of the duchess of Montesquiou-Fezensac), “Bildnis Karl Etlinger” (Portrait of Karl Etlinger), “Die Auswanderer,” (The Emigrants), and “Die Freunde” (The Friends). In the exhibition catalog, they even compared Kokoschka’s paintings to works by two mental patients, asking the reader to determine

“Which of these three drawings is really a dilettante work by the inmate of an insane asylum. Be amazed: The upper right! Both of the others in comparison were once designated as masterly graphics of Kokoschka.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, trans. David Brutt (New York: Macmillan, 1974) 87.

⁵⁰ West, 88.

⁵¹ Reichspropagandateilung, 30.

“Alter Herr”, which was exhibited at the Degenerate Art exhibit, is an example of the type of portrait that Kokoschka described in his autobiography. One cannot tell the origin of the man, he is simply an old man without any distinctive qualities that might give one a clue as to his position in society. His hands are all skin and bones, and the entire figure appears to be decaying, almost corpse-like. One can plainly see the red, green, orange, gray and brown colored blood running through his different veins. The wrinkles on his face almost appear to be rolling down his forehead, the bone in his nose is not straight, but rather crooked and jagged. His eyes are set deep inside their sockets, especially in contrast to his protruding cheek bones. There is very little sparkle left in his eyes, except maybe on the right, which also seems blood shot and irritated. His teeth are especially noticeable. Sticking out over his disappearing lower lip, they are crooked and almost the same color brown as his mustache. Visitors to the Degenerate Art exhibition would have probably been a little repulsed and scared by a portrait of this type. A portrait of a decaying man would not hold someone’s attention for very long. The viewers would most likely not understand that Kokoschka did not set out simply to capture an unattractive man, but that he wanted to convey something about this man beyond his somewhat hideous external qualities.

Nazi portraiture was not concerned with the internal qualities of the subject. Conrad Hommel was one of the most famous portraitists of the before 1933 and he became one of Hitler’s favorites. In 1939, Hommel’s portrait of General Field Marshal Hermann Göring (see fig. 8) went on display at the Great German Art exhibition. The painting is very different from the image of the “Alter Mann” that

Kokoschka created. Since the fall of the Third Reich, his paintings have been described as “pompous and empty.”⁵² He is in uniform, the giant white lapels clearly draw ones eyes to the iron cross he wears around his neck and other medals are also visible on each side. His shoulders are broad, giving him the appearance of a strong, sturdy soldier. He does not engage the viewer, but rather looks of to something in the far left. His eyes are blank. They do not offer a window into his soul, because everything the German public needed to know about him is on the surface of the canvas.

Landscape painting was a very popular genre for German artists, whether they identified themselves with modern movements or the traditional art academies. Many had long believed that Germany’s true character came to life in the rural landscape and as the society shifted from rural to urban, the countryside was eulogized as the “embodiment of lost cultural values and a disappearing way of life.”⁵³ However, the Nazis in the Degenerate Art exhibition condemned the Expressionists who chose to experiment with the landscape genre for stylistic reasons. They disagreed with the idea that nature should be painted as one experiences it, based on the feelings it invokes, rather than recording the reality of the scene. Basing the depiction of landscape on personal feelings would take away from the glorification of German soil. Artists, such as Heinrich Campendonk, Otto Dix, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, Franz Marc, Otto Mueller, Emil Nolde, Karl Schmidt-

⁵² Adam, 98.

⁵³ West, 34.

Rottluff and Christian Rohlf's all had landscapes included in the exhibition. The slogan that hung over many of the works said, "Nature as seen through sick minds."⁵⁴

Christian Rohlf's had seventeen paintings and four prints on display at the exhibition, among them several landscapes, including "Sonnenuntergang an der Ostsee (Sunset on the Baltic, see fig. 9). The Nazis did not condemn Rohlf's based on his political allegiance or activity, but simply on his works and the manner in which he used color.⁵⁵ Rohlf's did not wish to completely ignore external reality, but he often saw landscapes "as if through a light veil laid tenderly over simplified forms."⁵⁶

"Sonnenuntergang an der Ostsee" probably appeared to the public as the Nazi's described most of Rohlf's work, like he just squeezed some paint out over the canvas and smeared it around. There is a distinct line separating the ocean from the horizon. The water does appear to be in movement and an orange ball, presumably the sun, illuminates the center-left portion of the canvas. However, many of the colors that appear in the sky that express the emotions and ideas that Rohlf's sees in the sunset, may have seemed strange to the public. When most people think of sunsets, they think of yellows, oranges and maybe reds, but not greens, browns, blacks mixed together with the more traditional colors without any obvious pattern or organizational scheme. They might not have gone as far as Hitler--Hitler said, "Anybody who paints and sees the sky green and the pastures blue ought to be

⁵⁴ Barron, 48.

⁵⁵ Barron, 331.

⁵⁶ Franz Roh, *German Art in the 20th Century*. (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1968) 49.

sterilized”⁵⁷--, but they most likely thought it was unusual and may have gone as far as to question the type of person who would see such strange things in a sunset.

The landscape paintings in the approved art exhibition were simple and obvious. They showcase an idealized landscape as it was or as the majority of Germans envisioned it to be. External qualities were emphasized and no liberties were really taken to show how the image made one feel. In Karl Alexander’s painting “Harvest,” (see fig. 10) one sees peasants working in the fields, harvesting their hay. The trees are green, the sky is blue and white, the fields are perfectly organized and well kept, the men and women are strong and hard-working, and in the center of the canvas is a river flowing calmly through the valley. This type of landscape had dominated the German art scene for a century. It is not much different from Romantic masters, like Casper David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge.⁵⁸ The Nazis could easily incorporate tenets of National Socialism into these works, such as ideas about the need for *Lebensraum* (living space) and the relationship between nature and the German people. It was believed to be “the genre in which the German soul could be best expressed.”⁵⁹

Approved landscapes and portraits were easy to understand. Visitors to the Great German art exhibition would have understood the meanings or at the very least found them visually pleasing. Expressionism did not allow for easy interpretation. It was difficult for the average viewer to interpret the emotional power that the artists were trying to convey and they were not visually attractive. Most people see portraiture as a genre that idealizes and records the image of a loved one or important

⁵⁷ Delahunt.

⁵⁸ Adam, 130.

⁵⁹ Adam, 130.

figure for posterity. The importance of capturing a dying old man might have been lost on most people, who would not be able to see beyond his obvious external flaws. Similarly, most people would expect a landscape painting to depict a familiar scene or a noble vista. In contrast, Rohlf's sunset would have just seemed to be colors, many of which the average person does not even associate with a sunset, smeared across the canvas in a way that to most would not conjure up ideas about the beauty of nature.

Abstract Art

The Degenerate Art exhibition denounced all forms of abstract art. The Nazis had difficulties condemning abstract works because in their truest forms, they do not have subject matter, themes or symbols, so the Nazis simply condemned all abstract artists as evil madmen. The abstract artists included in the exhibition were Rudolf Bauer, Willi Baumeister, Fritz Burger-Mühlfeld, Lyonel Feininger, Jacoba van Heemskerck, Johannes Itten, Alexej von Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Wilhelm Lehmbruch, El Lissitzsky, Franz Marc, Johannes Molzahn, Piet Mondrian, Georg Muche, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Christian Rohlf, Oskar Schlemmer, Kurt Schwitters, and Arnold Trapp. Abstract works by these artists were often not presented as individual pieces, but as an entire group without any regard for whether they were displayed upside down or right side up.

The German public and ultimately all people faced with abstract art find it difficult to comprehend. On the surface, abstract works often appear to be just jumbled lines, shapes and colors. The abstract artist offers very little to help the viewer decipher the subject matter or themes in the works, if they are to be

deciphered at all. Many of the works in the Degenerate Art exhibition were simply titled “Abstract Composition.” In Leo Steinberg’s *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, he states that the public often feels “the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom...when confronted with an unfamiliar new style,” such as abstraction.⁶⁰ Steinberg says this is especially true when art leaves out any human matter, like in abstract art.⁶¹

Kandinsky’s abstract works were the primary target of the exhibition. Fourteen of his works were on display, all of which could be classified as abstract. In fact, Kandinsky is considered by many to have painted the first completely abstract work in Germany around 1910. According to Franz Roh, “Kandinsky’s nonobjective painting may be best understood as a form of dynamic expressionism, a movement of inner feeling that fought to escape the limiting effect of the fixed object.”⁶² Kandinsky thought that when depicting experiences and emotions that were primarily internal, like those connected with spirituality, there was no reason to create an objective image--spirituality is best described in simple shapes, colors and lines. The color and form of the paintings and drawings “were meant to depict the viewer’s inner self.”⁶³ Artists and critics in the early years of the twentieth century even found Kandinsky’s ideas a little strange. The most common phrase used when speaking of Kandinsky around 1910 was, “untalented swindler,”⁶⁴ although it’s obvious from the

⁶⁰ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 5.

⁶¹ Steinberg, 14.

⁶² Roh, 79.

⁶³ Barron, 263.

⁶⁴ Roh, 80.

number of abstract works on display in the exhibition hall that many eventually embraced his ideas.

“Improvisation Nr. 10” (see fig. 11) was one of his earlier works on display at the Degenerate Art exhibition. Visitors would have probably not really known how to react to such a work. It is difficult to describe. There are no distinct shapes, like circles or squares, to mention, and it is difficult to determine where one’s eye is supposed to be directed. Kandinsky’s color selection is very rich, with the center of the painting bright yellow and thick black lines outlining many of the other shapes. It would have been difficult for the German public to decipher Kandinsky’s inner meaning from the work. As Steinberg argued, new styles of art, such as abstraction, probably would have inspired discomfort, bewilderment, boredom and anger among the German public. They might have even agreed with the Nazis that this style of art could only come from someone who was degenerate.

All of the works of art included in the Great German art exhibition would have been in stark opposition to abstract works by Kandinsky’s and the others listed. The other approved works, like the landscape and portrait provided in this chapter, as well as the images of women and soldiers in the previous chapter offer evidence to demonstrate the Nazis insistence on representational art. Only through the advocacy of representational art could they count on the public to understand the political, racial and cultural values that they were advocating. Abstract art was too ambiguous and cerebral.

Whereas the indictments of artists such as Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner focused primarily on their thematic and subject matter selection, many Expressionist artists in the Degenerate Art exhibition could not be condemned on these grounds. It was neither the subject matter nor the themes that the Nazis found so objectionable in these examples. Landscape paintings and portraits were approved and encouraged by the Nazis, but they had certain stylistic standards that works of these types had to meet. The absence of discernible subject matter made abstract art the most intolerable to the Nazis. They could not blame Kandinsky for ridiculing Germany's heroic soldiers or presenting German women as prostitutes, because only geometric shapes, lines and bright colors, dominated the majority of his works.

The Nazis wanted to be able to use art to convey their political, social and racial ideology to the masses. Only works that could be classified as representational and promoted favored emotions could help them achieve this goal. Works by Expressionists and artists who experimented with abstraction could not be incorporated as approved works because they were not concerned with objective reality and were seen as too emotional. The Great German Art exhibition provided a place where the Nazis could portray works that accurately presented reality and promoted their ideology, but the Degenerate Art exhibition made it possible for the Nazis to present to the public, works that they argued could have only been produced by madmen.

The Nazis chose some of the most dramatic examples of Expressionist and Abstract art to put on display at the Degenerate Art exhibition. Oskar Kokoschka's "Old Man" with his wrinkled body and sunken eyes would not have been pleasing to

a majority of the visitors. They would have most likely not been able to overcome the shock of his outward appearance to understand that Kokoschka was trying to get them to think about the man himself and not his aged facade. Kandinsky's work is challenging for anyone. It is not difficult to imagine that the average German visitor to the exhibition might have agreed with the Nazis condemnation of Kandinsky and other abstract artists as more than a little crazy.

Chapter Three

“Inferior” Inspiration

All the artistic and cultural blather of Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists and the like is neither sound in racial terms nor tolerable in national terms. It can at best be regarded as the expression of a worldview that freely admits to the dissolution of all existing ideas, all nations and all races, their mixing and adulteration is the loftiest goal of their intellectual creators and clique of leaders. With innate, naïve effrontery this cultural equivalent to political destruction seeks to delight the new state with a Stone Age culture, as if nothing had happened.⁶⁵

Many German modern artists, especially the members of *Die Brücke*, were fascinated by non-European cultures, as well as by “inferior” European cultures, and incorporated themes and images from the art of these cultures in their works. The Degenerate Art exhibition included works by these artists because they violated tenets of the Nazis’ racial ideology and because their influence was seen as a threat to German culture. African and Polynesian art, which highly influenced modern artists in Europe, were seen by the Nazis as oddities and the products of primitive, inferior cultures. Some modern artists also admired the art of the Gypsies, who had been victims of racial discrimination in Europe for centuries. The Nazis capitalized on these feelings, promoting the idea that Germany was superior to not only non-Europeans, but also to other European cultures, and requiring that all approved artists depict Aryan perfection.

Primitivism

In the Degenerate Art exhibition, there were six artists whose works were selected because they violated tenets of the Nazi’s racial ideology by incorporating

⁶⁵ Barron, 56.

images from Polynesian and African art into their paintings. Five of these artists, Erich Heckel, Otto Mueller, Emile Nolde, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, were members of *Die Brücke*. This group became increasingly interested in learning about African and Polynesian art and culture around 1909. Otto Mueller also showed an interest and appreciation for Gypsy culture in his works, including “Zigeuner vor dem Zelt”, which was displayed at the Degenerate Art exhibit. Max Beckmann, who was not a member of *Die Brücke*, had one work on display, “Stilleben mit Musikinstrumenten” (Still-life with Musical Instruments), which was chosen because it promoted Jazz music and African culture. Slogans, such as “The Jewish longing for the wilderness reveals itself--in Germany the Negro becomes the racial ideal of a degenerate art” hung above these artists’ works.⁶⁶

Embracing African, Polynesian, and Gypsy culture would have separated these modern artists from a majority of the German population. In *The Visual Arts in Nazi Germany, 1890 – 1937: Utopia and Despair*, West said of the

Brücke artists decorated their studios with artifacts from the Palau Islands and cultivated a Bohemian lifestyle and naturalist practices, which gave them the fantasy of living in an unsophisticated, pre-modern society. To Brücke artists, primitivism offered a form of vitalism, a way of rebelling safely against the complacency of contemporary society and a means of rationalizing their sexual libertinism.⁶⁷

They saw in these cultures possible solutions to the superficiality of modern bourgeoisie society, such as sexual conservatism, consumerism and other economic and political problems. Whereas artists, such as fellow *Brücke* member Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, chose to focus on members of German society at war with their modern

⁶⁶ Barron, 56.

⁶⁷ West, 69.

surroundings, like prostitutes, Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, and Mueller created works influenced by societies who had not yet been corrupted. Where many modern artists found inspiration in these foreign and exotic cultures, the German public would have interpreted their different traditions and lifestyles as inferior to their own.

In the works of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff on display at the Degenerate Art exhibition, one can see the stylistic influence that African art had on many modern artists. The curators of a current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City have said that the African sculpture and tribal masks, which Schmidt-Rottluff saw on display at the ethnographic exhibitions in Dresden and Berlin, as well as in Carl Einstein's book *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture) influenced his art.⁶⁸ In his woodcut "Mutter" (Mother), also known as "Bildnis der Mutter" (Portrait of the artist's mother, see fig. 12), from 1916, the influence of African tribal masks on Schmidt-Rottluff is highly evident. "The protruding lips...and overall parallel striations of his woodcut are derived from the form of, and the markings on, the Teke head in Einstein's book."⁶⁹ The "ski jump nose" of the mother is also typical of African tribal masks.

The public who viewed Karl Schmidt-Rottluff's work at the Degenerate Art exhibition probably would not have necessarily recognized the elements of African tribal art in "Mutter" and may have questioned whether she was a woman at all. She does not have any characteristics that are overtly feminine, with the exception of maybe her large lips. She has very rigid features and her hair hardly resembles any of the styles embraced by women in 1916 or in 1937. They probably would have

⁶⁸ Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). "Artists of Brücke: Themes in German Expressionist Prints. (21 March 2003) <<http://www.moma.org/brucke/>>

⁶⁹ Moma.

thought it horrible for an artist to have presented his own mother in such an unflattering manner.

The Nazis included Karl Schmidt-Rottluff in the exhibition because they believed that his work “glorified the cretin, the idiot, and the cripple at the expense of the Aryan and Hitler did not wish these ‘inferior’ beings depicted, in keeping with his dogma of racial purification.”⁷⁰ Schmidt-Rottluff’s painting did not present the image of an ideal Aryan mother. The Nazis most likely would have also agreed that the subject of the woodcut has few female attributes at all and definitely does not have the characteristics of a true German as outlined in the many charts and graphs produced by the Nazis that depict “true” Aryan noses, eyes, mouths, and other features.

The exhibition also included thirty paintings by Emil Nolde, several of which were influenced by a scientific exhibition he went on Russia, Siberia, China, Japan and New Guinea in 1915.⁷¹ Following the trip, he spoke out against the German colonization of the South Seas, “condemning the rape of tribal cultures by ‘civilized’ powers and insisting on the aesthetic worth of tribal art.”⁷² He said that German museums should gather as much from these cultures as they can to preserve “the last traces of primal man while it was still possible.”⁷³ He worked for many years on a study entitled *Artistic Expression among Primitive Peoples*,⁷⁴ which he failed to complete.

⁷⁰ Barron, 341.

⁷¹ Barron, 315.

⁷² Jill Lloyd, “Primitivism and Modernity: An Expressionist Dilemma,” *German Art in the Twentieth Century Painting and Sculpture, 1905-1985* (exhibition catalog, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1985) 109.

⁷³ Barron, 315.

⁷⁴ West, 68.

Ironically, Emile Nolde remained a firm believer in German superiority and nationalism throughout his life. When the Nazis' came to power in 1933, he tried to protect his career by joining the Nazi Party, and in his 1934 autobiography, *Jahre der Kämpfe* (Years of Struggle), he denounced artists who chose to depict “half-breeds, bastards and mulattoes” in their works.⁷⁵ Despite this statement, many of Nolde's works were nonetheless included in the Degenerate Art exhibition. The Nazis paid little attention to what he said in 1934. The subject matter of his works was contrary to their standards of approved art, and therefore he belonged in the exhibition. Although he spoke out against those who painted “half-breeds, bastards and mulattoes,” the Nazis still disagreed with any depiction of anyone outside the Aryan race in art. Nazi ideologues such as Bettina Feistel-Rohmeder made it clear that the Nazis saw “the fascination with the life of people of a simpler nature and darker color as an indication of degeneration.” Therefore, despite Nolde's professed belief in the superiority of German culture, Nolde was denounced as degenerate. His painting “Mulattin” (Mulatto woman, see fig. 13) from 1913 is an example of one of his “exotic and savage” South Sea oils that hung in room four of the exhibition.⁷⁶ It is a nude portrait of a woman, whose distinct skin color and dark curly hair highlight her Polynesian heritage. She appears to be nude, with the exception of a large gold necklace that hangs around her neck, and her makeup is highly noticeable, similar to the portraits of prostitutes done by fellow Brücke artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Many visitors to the Degenerate Art exhibition would have disagreed with Emil Nolde's interest in Polynesian cultures, even if they had agreed with him

⁷⁵ Barron, 319.

⁷⁶ Barron, 315.

regarding the superiority of German culture over “primitive” cultures. Many would have objected to the depiction of a mulatto woman in “Mulattin,” regardless of her exact ethnic background. Most people did not think the intermingling of different races should be allowed, even in art. In addition, people had long grown accustomed to seeing the cultures of Polynesia as oddities. The Zoological Gardens in Dresden had often held exhibitions that included dancers and other people of different cultures⁷⁷ just as they presented wild and exotic animals from different lands. While modern artists attended these exhibitions for knowledge and inspiration, the fact that they were held at the zoo is indicative of the attitude that curators were helping shape towards people of other cultures. They typically saw little difference between these “primitive” peoples and a giant or three-headed snake at a traveling carnival. When presented with paintings of Polynesian men and women at the Degenerate Art exhibition, such as Emil Nolde’s “Mulattin”, they got the Nazi’s message that these were inferior peoples and they understood why the Nazis wished to remove them as approved subject matter for German art.

Another member of *Die Brücke*, Otto Mueller, had twenty-five works in the Degenerate Art exhibition. The location of many of his works is unknown, but for those that survived, the reasons that the Nazis found them objectionable is obvious. The “free and colorful life of the gypsies” fascinated Mueller and he made many trips to Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary in the 1920s to learn more about their culture and to paint the Gypsy people and their lives.⁷⁸ Scenes of daily life and images of nude women, whose dark skin tones indicate they were based on the many Gypsy women

⁷⁷ Moma.

⁷⁸ Barron, 308.

he encountered on his travels, dominated those selected for the exhibition. The Nazis disapproved of any work of art that had dark-skinned subjects, because it violated their ideas about racial purity. Mueller's paintings of Gypsies were accompanied by slogans such as, "The Jewish longing for the wilderness reveals itself—In Germany the negro becomes the racial ideal of degenerate art," "An insult to German womanhood," and "The ideal—cretin and whore."⁷⁹

The Gypsies have been the objects of discrimination for centuries and, historically, it is not surprising that the Nazis considered them undesirable as subject matter for German art. Members of the public who attended the Degenerate Art exhibition most likely shared the Nazis' opinions of the Gypsies. People looked down upon the Gypsies for being antisocial and for refusing to abandon their migratory life style, as illustrated in Mueller's painting, "Zigeuner vor dem Zelt" (Gypsies in front of a tent, see fig. 14). This painting is an example of one of Mueller's paintings depicting a scene from everyday life among the Gypsies of Eastern Europe. Painted in 1925, it shows a middle-aged man and a young girl seated in front of a tent that dominates a majority of the canvas. In the background, a woman in a striped shirt appears to be working and a young girl peers from behind the left side of the tent. Sunflowers and the back of a horse or donkey are also visible behind the tent. Visitors to the exhibition would have understood why the Nazis felt it necessary to condemn Mueller. He had chosen to devote much of his career to documenting a culture through his art that most people saw as inferior to their own. These people, who chose to live in twentieth-century Europe amongst the civilized German people, and yet still chose to live in tents, ride on donkeys and turn their

⁷⁹ Barron, 46.

backs on modern society, were probably seen as a threat, or at the very least a nuisance, to most Germans.

The Nazis condemned artists who turned to exotic cultures and primitive styles for inspiration. Artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Dix, Emil Nolde and Otto Mueller violated Nazi ideas about appropriate subject matter, in addition to tenets of Nazi racial ideology that forbade all depictions of non-Aryans. Schmidt-Rottluff was consistently under fire for his Expressionist style and his interest in painting portraits that resembled African tribal masks, like "Mutter." The Nazis relied on the German people's belief in the inferiority of non-European and Gypsy cultures to launch their attack on these artists. The visitors to the Degenerate Art exhibition probably did not understand why modern artists held these cultures up as models for twentieth century society. Centuries of looking down on these non-Western cultures had only been strengthened under the Nazi regime. While members of the *Die Brücke* admired and wished to create a bohemian lifestyle modeled after them, the majority of Germans only saw strange, dangerous savages.

Conclusion

The Degenerate Art exhibition closed its doors in November 1937 and traveled to thirteen German and Austrian cities in different configurations until intensified fighting in 1941 made it impossible to continue. The artists and works of art on display met varying fates. Some of the condemned artists, such as Georg Grosz, had already fled Germany in the years prior to the exhibition. Emil Nolde and others remained in their homes and attempted to maintain some semblance of their former lives, despite the growing limitations that the Hitler government placed on their freedom to work. Tragically, some of the artists, such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, chose suicide over watching their works and beloved country destroyed. Many of the paintings, prints and sculptures were lost forever. They were tossed into Nazi-organized bonfires or were destroyed in Allied bombings. Those works of art that escaped this fate were placed on the auction block in Lucerne, Switzerland to raise money -- ironically -- for the Third Reich.

The Degenerate Art exhibition was a powerful addition to the traditional means of political discourse that the Nazis used to present their political ideals to the public, relying on forms of aesthetic expression that exploited the obvious visual and thematic qualities of art and the well-established division between modern artists and the German people. The exhibition was a propaganda success, however tragic it may have been for the German and European art world. Three million visitors came; very few were believed to have come out of appreciation for the artists. In addition, the

numbers of artists interested in seeking official approval of their work from government officials by having their works displayed in the Great German Art exhibition increased every year as more and more artists, however, mediocre in comparison to those who were condemned as “degenerate,” capitalized on the Nazis’ promotion of traditional artistic styles.

The most successful element of the exhibition was the Nazi’s ability to use it as a forum for delivering their political message to the German people. They relied on the public’s uneasiness with modern art and its often-incomprehensible qualities to promote their ideas about Aryanism, anti-Semitism, and other issues, including an insistence on realism in art. They selected works of art and artists to focus on many themes, three of which have been included in this study as representative of the way that the Nazis used art to promote their ideology.

The exhibition included examples of the way in which women had been represented in modern art to illicit strong opposing reactions from the public. By condemning these works, the Nazis also attempted to propagandize its citizens, presenting their official vision of the ideal German woman. They wanted women to be examples of Aryan perfection, blonde, blue-eyed and athletic, as well as feminine and maternal. Women’s role was in the home and not the workplace. German women were encouraged to have children to replace the undesirables – the Jews, the Gypsies, the Poles and others -- who were being eliminated from Central and Eastern Europe, and to insure the future of the Reich.

To prepare the German people for the war that was deemed necessary to restore German honor and create enough territory for the growing population, the

Nazis established a nationalistic agenda and attempted to remind Germans of their military heritage. They wanted to remind the population of past victories on the battlefield, encourage the desire to seek revenge for humiliating defeats, and advance hatred of non-Germans at home and abroad. The Nazis took dramatic steps, including the condemnation of pacifism in art, to bring the population in line with its agenda of expansion and extermination.

One of the most important, and most frequently discussed, aspects of Nazi ideology was its exploitation and promotion of racism and anti-Semitism. The Nazis promoted pseudo-scientific research that they hoped would result in the perfection of the Aryan race and promoted the female reproductive role to achieve this goal. Those who did not meet their racial and cultural standards were eliminated from society and any Germans who were known or continued to fraternize with these enemies, such as modern artists, also risked victimization and alienation from society.

The Nazis believed that German fascism would only be successful if their ideology and promotional propaganda was easily understandable to the masses. The proper relationship between aesthetics and politics could be established if the art they promoted “was reduced to its essential concepts” and they also believed that “Only through constant repetition [could they] finally bring success in the manner of instilling ideas into the memory of the crowd.”⁷⁸ The Nazis glorified academically trained artists who limited their works to classically inspired painting and sculpture, traditional depictions of rural and family life, as well as the glorification of German history and militarism.

⁷⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) 180-181.

However, it is also important to look beyond the treatment of political and cultural themes in the art on display in the Degenerate Art exhibition. The role of these artists in society and the ways that emotions were conveyed in their art are crucial in an examination of the way in which authoritarian governments use art for propaganda purposes. The Nazis chose artists with a history of creating political and cultural controversy, most notably Otto Dix and Georg Grosz, artists who adamantly refused to conform to the expectations of the mainstream German society. Some artists, such as members of *Die Brücke*, sought not only artistic inspiration, but also models for social and cultural life in foreign cultures that the majority of the Germans, regardless of whether they adopted the severe racist and anti-Semitic ideology of the Nazis, found to be inferior to their Central European way of life.

The styles that modern artists experimented with, whether it was Abstractionism, Expressionism or a combination of both, had to be condemned by the Nazis across the board in order to properly convey their propagandistic message. The emotional ambiguity that characterized many of these works did not provide the Nazis with a concrete theme or subject that they could condemn outright. The Nazis only option was to ridicule all works in these stylistic genres and make it clear that their ambiguity and their intent to try to convey inner emotions by foregoing many realistic elements, was unacceptable. The German people who saw this art as cerebral, or just as blobs of color on a canvas, felt little sympathy for the artists. They felt no bond to this community and were easily convinced that these artists might be a threat to the state and to German culture, and that they might be degenerate, as the title of the exhibition suggests.

The Degenerate Art exhibition used art as a tool for promoting tenets of National Socialism. They relied on the trends in art history that had created tension between the German public and the modern art community. Through the condemnation of works with certain themes, such as the role of women in society and abstract art, and the juxtaposition of these works with the approved works on display at the Great German Art exhibition, the Nazis were able to convey their political ideology through aesthetic means. The condemnation of works that could be used to convey their message either in a positive or negative manner were condemned across the board as the works of the threatening madmen.

The Nazi regime worked tirelessly to control all aspects of German life and make sure that everything was a reflection of their social, cultural, political, racial and economic ideology. The modern art community that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century did not fit the mold and therefore steps were taken to remove all traces of their influence from society. Since art is a visual medium, the most obvious and effective way of condemning modern artists was not through speeches and direct action against the individual artists, such as expulsion or extermination, but rather through the organization of an exhibition where people could be confronted with the objectionable images and the Nazis could manipulate their emotions. Specific artists and works were exposed to the German people and could then be “cleansed from the temple of German art,”⁸⁰ paving the way, in the Nazis mind, for a new German art community whose stylistic and thematic qualities could be harnessed not only for the promotion of Nazi aesthetic ideology, but also the Nazi domestic and worldview as a whole.

⁸⁰ West, 189.

The issue of government interference in the exertion of artistic freedom did not originate with the Nazis and did not end with the fall of the Third Reich in 1945. There was tension between Kaiser Wilhelm II and the modern art community long before the Nazis came to power. The Kaiser's ministers attempted to turn the public against the modern artists of that era and also prohibited the exhibition of certain artists in museums and at international exhibitions. The Soviet Union also offers another example of a totalitarian regime that was effective in suppressing the modern art community, but they did not go as far as staging an equivalent to the Degenerate Art exhibition.⁸¹

In the United States much more recently, issues have also risen in regards to the relationship between politics and aesthetics, and over modern artists who experiment with controversial subject matter and styles, such as Robert Mapplethorpe, whose funding from the National Endowment for the Arts made the news in the 1980s. The award to Mapplethorpe attracted the attention of Senator Jesse Helms, who objected to the use of federal tax dollars to support Mapplethorpe and other avant-garde artists, but also provided Helms and other conservatives an opportunity to attack art that they found politically, thematically and stylistically objectionable. Former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, also received criticism over his attempts to shut down an exhibition called "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that included a piece showing the Virgin Mary made partly out of elephant dung.⁸² He was heavily

⁸¹ Peter Jelavich. "National Socialism, Art and Power in the 1930s." *Past and Present* 164 (1999): 257.

⁸² Bruce Shapiro. "Everyone's a critic: New Yorkers apparently do not support Mayor Giuliani's holy war on the Brooklyn Museum." *Salon.com.*, February 10, 1999. (5 March 2003)
<<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/10/12/giuliani>. >

criticized for trying to use the power of the New York City government to shut down an exhibition that he and others found offensive on personal religious grounds.

The attempt by the Nazis in the Degenerate Art Exhibition to stifle artistic freedom and to subvert artistic expression for political purposes is not simply a history lesson of a particular time and place. This experience should also serve as an object lesson of contemporary relevance, demonstrating the power of art to communicate emotions and ideas and to affect the public's perceptions of both interior and the exterior reality, making art a tempting and effective tool for political propaganda.

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