

Guide to the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition (1937)

Abstract

On July 19, 1937, the “Degenerate Art” exhibition opened in the Hofgarten arcades of Munich’s *Residenz*. It included 650 works of art confiscated from thirty-two German museums. For the National Socialists, the term “degenerate” applied to any type of art that was incompatible with their ideology or propaganda. Whole movements were labeled as such, including Expressionism, Impressionism, Dada, New Objectivity, Surrealism, Cubism, and Fauvism, among others. Many of Germany’s most talented and innovative artists suffered official defamation: for example, George Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Ernst, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, Paul Klee, and Ernst Barlach. Avant-garde artists and museum directors who purchased or exhibited modern art had already been barred from professional activity as early as 1933. With this exhibition, the visual arts were forced into complete submission to censorship and National Socialist “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*]. Initiated by Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels and President of the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts Adolf Ziegler, the exhibition traveled to twelve additional cities from 1937 to 1941. In all, the show drew more than 3 million visitors. The exhibition sought to demonstrate the “degeneration” of artworks by placing them alongside drawings by mentally disabled people and photographs of physically handicapped individuals. Comparisons of this sort aimed to highlight the “diseased,” “Jewish-Bolshevist,” and inferior character of these artworks and to warn of an impending “cultural decline.” As an exercise in contrast, the opposite—good, “healthy,” “German” art—could be seen in the “Great German Art Exhibition,” on view in the House of German Art only a few meters away.

Source

Guide to the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition

This exhibition has been put together by the Reich Propaganda Directorate, Culture Office. It will be shown in the largest cities in all of the districts [*Gaue*]. [...]

What does the “Degenerate Art” exhibition want to achieve?

At the outset of a new era for the German people [*Volk*], *it wants* to offer a firsthand overview of the dreadful concluding chapter of those decades of cultural deterioration preceding the great change.

By appealing to the sound judgment of the people, *it wants* to put a stop to the palaver and claptrap of all those literary cliques and hangers-on, many of whom would still try to deny that we ever experienced artistic degeneracy.

It wants to make clear that this degeneracy in art was more than just passing foolishness, idiocy, and rash experimentation that might have run its course and died out even without the National Socialist revolution.

It wants to show that this was not a “necessary ferment,” but rather a deliberate and calculated attack on the very essence and ongoing existence of art itself.

It wants to point out the common roots of *political* anarchy and *cultural* anarchy and to unmask degenerate art as *art-Bolshevism* in every sense of the term.

It wants to make clear the philosophical, political, racial, and moral goals and intentions of those who

were the driving forces behind the subversion.

It also wants to show the extent to which these symptoms of degeneracy spread from those driving forces who were acting deliberately to infect more or less unwitting acolytes, who, despite *previous*—and in some cases also *subsequent*—evidence of formal artistic talent, were so lacking in *conscience*, *character*, or *common sense* as to participate in the general Jewish and Bolshevik hype.

By doing so, *it also wants* to show the true danger of a development that, steered by a few Jewish and openly Bolshevik leaders, could succeed in putting such individuals into the service of Bolshevik anarchy in *cultural politics* when those very same individuals might very well have eschewed any affiliation with Bolshevism in *party politics*.

It wants to prove above all that *not one* of the men who were involved in any way in the degeneracy of art can now dismiss this activity as “harmless youthful folly.”

Out of all this comes, finally, what the “Degenerate Art” exhibition does *not* want to do.

It does not want to assert that *all* of the names attached to the sorry artworks shown here also appeared on the membership lists of the *Communist* party. Since *no* such assertion is made, *no refutation* is necessary.

It does not want to deny that one or another of the artists represented here has at some point—either before or since—“been capable of something different.” Yet this exhibition must not gloss over the fact that in the years of the major Bolshevik-Jewish attack on German art such men stood on the side of subversion.

It does not want to prevent those featured artists who are of German blood—and who have not followed their former Jewish friends abroad—from now *honestly striving* and *fighting* for the foundations of a new and healthy creativity. *It wants* and *must* prevent a situation, however, in which such men are foisted on the new state and its future-oriented people as “the natural standard-bearers of Third Reich art” by the circles and cliques of that dark past.

On the Organization of the Exhibition

Since the sheer abundance of the diverse symptoms of degeneracy shown in the exhibition make an almost crushing impression on the visitor, a clear [exhibition] organization ensures that works similar in tendency and form are clearly grouped together in each room. A brief description of the guiding principles follows below.

Group 1

This room gives a general overview of *representational barbarism* from the point of view of craftsmanship. This group illustrates the progressive *degradation of the sense for form and color*, the *deliberate contempt for all of the technical foundations of the visual arts*, the *garish blurring of color* combined with the deliberate *distortion* of drawing, the absolute *stupidity of subject choice*—all of them things that gradually assumed the character of an impertinent provocation to any normal viewer interested in the arts.

Group 2

This room brings together pictorial works that deal with *religious content*. In the Jewish press, these horrors were once described as “revelations of German religiosity.” To a person of normal sense, however, these “revelations” rather seem like *witchcraft*, which he, regardless of the religious denomination to which he belongs, perceives as an impertinent *mockery of all religious ideas*.

Especially noteworthy is the fact that painted and carved mockeries of *Jewish Old Testament* legends are not to be found. By contrast, the figures of *Christian* legends grin at us with ever new and diabolic grimaces.

Group 3

The graphic works shown in this section are conclusive evidence for the *political roots of degenerate art*. Using the expressive devices of *artistic anarchy*, these works preach *political anarchy as a demand*. Every single picture in this group calls for *class warfare* in the Bolshevik sense. By means of a coarsely tendentious proletarian art, the creative human being is supposed to be confirmed in his conviction that he will remain a slave languishing in spiritual chains until the very last property owner, the very last non-proletarian has been removed by the hoped-for *Bolshevik revolution*. Workers, workers' wives, and workers' children with the grey and green *faces of misery* stare out at the viewer. The drawings depict all imaginable kinds of "capitalists" and "exploiters" who mockingly disregard the misery of working people. From butcher to banker, all of these "slaveholders" are depicted. Noticeably overlooked by the painters of class warfare were certain Jewish art dealers, who certainly weren't starving at the time and who enriched themselves significantly by this proletarian art.

Group 4

This section, too, is of a marked *political tendentiousness*. Here, "art" is put into the service of Marxist propaganda for conscientious objection. The intention is clear: the viewer is meant to recognize the soldier as a murderer or as the pointlessly butchered victim of a "capitalist world order" in the sense of Bolshevik class warfare. Most of all, the intention is to eradicate the populace's deeply rooted respect for all soldierly virtues, namely courage, bravery, and the willingness to fight. Thus, in addition to distorted images of crippled veterans designed to evoke disgust and views into mass graves painted with great sophistication, the drawings in this section depict German soldiers as fools, common erotic lechers, and drunkards. The fact that, with their base efforts, not only Jews but also "artists" of German blood thus retroactively *once again reinforce*, without being asked, enemy *propaganda about wartime atrocities*, propaganda that had already been exposed as a web of lies at the time—this fact will forever remain *a blot on German cultural history*.

Group 5

This section of the exhibition provides insight into the *moral* side of degenerate art. For the "artists" represented here, the entire world apparently is one big *brothel*, and to them humanity is made up of *harlots and pimps*. Among this painted and drawn pornography are drawings and paintings that cannot even be shown in the context of the exhibition "Degenerate Art" when one considers that women will visit this show as well. It is completely incomprehensible to any individual of today's Germany that just a few years ago, even in the times of Center Party rule under Heinrich Brüning, such abysmal vulgarity, such squalidness and clearly exposed criminality was allowed to appeal to the basest instinct of sub-human beings unhindered. Yet one thing must not be overlooked: the ultimate objective of this side of degenerate art, too, is political. This can be seen from the fact that almost all of these vulgarities also display clear Marxist-class warfare tendencies. Time and again, we see drawings on which lechers from the "propertied class" and their harlots are contrasted with the starving figures of "proletarians" tiredly dragging themselves along in the background. In other drawings, the harlot is idealized and contrasted with the woman of bourgeois society, who, according to the creators of this "art," is much more morally corrupt than the prostitute. In short: *the moral agenda of Bolshevism screams at the viewer from all walls in this section*.

Group 6

Here, a larger number of works serve to illustrate how degenerate art often served that part of Marxist and Bolshevik ideology whose goal is this: *the systematic elimination of the last remnants of all race consciousness*. While the harlot was portrayed as a moral ideal in the pictures in the previous section, we

now encounter the *Negro* and the *South Sea Islander* as the apparent *racial ideal* of “modern art.” It is hard to believe that the creators of these images call Germany or Europe home or at least did so at the time. Yet it must be stressed that this nigger art also is so barbaric in terms of craftsmanship that many a Negro would justifiably refuse to see people of his own kind in these figures or even be accused of being the creator of such pictorial works.

Group 7

This section of the exhibition makes clear that apart from the Negro as a racial ideal, the “modern” art of the time also had one very special *intellectual ideal*, namely the *idiot*, the *cretin* and the *paralytic*. Where these “artists” portrayed themselves or each other, the results are extremely cretinous faces and figures. Judging by the rest of the works, this may not always be a fundamental decision against actual likeness. It is certain, however, that each stupid, idiot-like face has *particularly* inspired the creativity of the “modernists” represented here. Otherwise, it cannot be explained why this section of the exhibition is so rich in sculpture, graphic works, and painting. It shows human figures who, in fact, have more in common with gorillas than with humans. There are portraits compared to which the first historically verified attempts at depicting humans found in Stone Age caves are mature masterpieces. *Yet until a few years ago, as the purchase prices show, the highest prices were demanded and paid even for such atrocious pieces.*

Group 8

For the sake of variety, *only Jews* are represented in this small room. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, it should be mentioned that this is only a small selection of the numerous sorry efforts by Jews that the exhibition shows overall. The great “merit” that the Jewish spokespersons, dealers, and supporters of degenerate art have doubtless earned, sufficiently justifies this “*special honoring*.” It is here that we can find, among other things, “the new human being,” as the Jew *Freundlich* has conjured him. Other sculpted and painted desert dreams can be found standing and hanging here as well, in the face of which words must fail us.

Group 9

This section can only be titled “*Complete Lunacy*.” It takes up the largest part of the exhibition and includes a cross section of the spawn of all the “*isms*” that Flechtheim, Wollheim, and the “Cohn-sorts”^[1] have hatched, promoted, and flogged over the years. In the pictures and drawings of this chamber of horrors it is impossible to tell in most cases what those sick minds were thinking when they picked up the brush or pencil. While one eventually “painted” using only the contents of garbage cans, another made do with three black lines and a piece of wood on a large white background. A third had the bright idea to paint “some circles” onto two square meters of canvas. A fourth consecutively used a good three kilograms of paint for three self-portraits because he could not decide whether his head ought to be green or sulfur yellow, round or rectangular, and whether his eyes are red or sky blue or whatever. In this group of madness, visitors to the exhibition only shake their heads and laugh. Certainly not without reason. Yet when one considers that all of these “artworks” were taken not from the dusty corners of deserted studios but from the art collections and museums of major German cities, where some of them still hung in the initial years after the National Socialist takeover and were presented to the astonished public, one can laugh no longer: *all one can do is grapple with one’s anger at the fact that a people as decent as the Germans have been so gravely abused in such a manner to begin with.*

[...]

NOTES

[1] Jewish family names, especially the name Cohn, often formed the basis of anti-Semitic puns and other types of wordplay in German. The word *Cohnsorten* translates “as types of people like Cohn,” with Cohn being representative of a Jewish person. The term was used disparagingly—note by GHDI

project staff.

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