



German History in Documents and Images

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Hitler's Speech at the Opening of the House of German Art in Munich (July 18, 1937)

On the day before the start of the “Degenerate Art” exhibition, Hitler opened the House of German Art in Munich, a new museum designed by architect Paul Ludwig Troost (1873–1934). At the same time, he also opened the museum's very first show, the “Great German Art Exhibition.” It was the first of eight annual exhibitions that aimed to define and illustrate “German art.” The exhibited works were selected in a public competition. A few weeks before the exhibition opened, however, the appointed jury, which consisted of artists loyal to the regime—such as Adolf Ziegler, Arno Breker, and Karl Albiker—was dismissed by Hitler and replaced with his own personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. On display were some 900 works of art: nudes and genre paintings, still lifes, idealized landscapes, mythological scenes, images of workers and heroes, and, above all, portraits of “pure” and “Aryan” people. At the opening, Hitler delivered a programmatic speech on National Socialist cultural policy and its conception of “German art,” making perfectly clear that the Nazi regime would only accept art that was suitable for propaganda purposes. Any type of art that did not comply with Nazi ideology would be labeled “degenerate” and banned from museums.

When, four years ago, the ceremonial cornerstone laying for this building took place, we were all aware that it was imperative to lay not only the cornerstone for a new building, but also the foundation for a new and genuinely German art. The goal was to bring about a turning point in the development of all German cultural creation.

Many found it difficult to let go of the term “Munich Glass Palace” and to give this new building a new name. Still, at the time, we believed that it was correct to proclaim this house, whose rooms were to experience the continuation of what was once the most famous German art exhibit, not as the new Glass Palace, but rather as the “House of German Art.” For that was also precisely the way to examine and answer the question of whether a German art still existed at all.

The collapse and overall decline of Germany was – as we know – not only academic or political, but rather, and perhaps to a far greater extent, cultural. Moreover, this process was also not solely attributable to the fact of the lost war. Such catastrophes have often afflicted peoples and states, and these events have not infrequently provided an impetus for their cleansing and, with it, their inner elevation. But that flood of slime and refuse, which the year 1918 spewed onto the surface of our lives, was not produced by the loss of the war, but instead only released by it. It was only through the defeat that such a thoroughly rotten body first experienced the full extent of its inner decay. After the collapse of those earlier social, political, and cultural forms that were only seemingly in order, the baseness that was underlying them for so long began to triumph, and in all areas of life at that.

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The question has often been asked: what does “to be German” actually mean? Of all the definitions that have been put forth over the past centuries by so many men, one appears to me as the worthiest; it attempts less to provide an explanation than to establish a law. The most beautiful law that I could wish to imagine for my people as their life task on this earth was already declared long ago by a great German: “to be German means to be clear.” This implies, therefore, that to be German also means to be logical and above all to be true. [. . .]

Now this deep inner longing for such a true German art, one that carries within it the features of this law of clarity, has always lived among our people. This longing filled our great painters, our sculptors, the creators of our architecture, our thinkers and our poets, and more than anyone our musicians. When on that fateful day, June 6, 1931, the old Glass Palace went up in fire and flames, an immortal treasure of precisely such true German art burned with it as well. They were called the Romantics but they were most beautiful representatives of this German quest for the real and true nature of our people and the most honest and virtuous expression of these inwardly experienced laws of life.

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During the long years of planning for the new Reich, and thus for its intellectual creation and shaping, I often devoted myself to the tasks that the rebirth of the nation would impose on us especially in the area of its cultural purification. After all, Germany was to arise again not only politically or economically, but above all also culturally. Indeed, I was and am convinced that this last aspect will take on much greater importance for the future than the first two. I have always battled against and rejected the opinion of the small minds of the November period, who simply dismissed every great cultural plan, indeed, every large building project, by asserting that a politically and economically ruined people must not burden itself with such projects.

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Among the many plans that I contemplated during the war and in the period after the collapse was a plan to erect, in Munich, the city with the greatest tradition of artistic exhibits – and this seemed especially important given the utterly disgraceful condition of the old building – a new exhibition palace for German art. Many years ago, I already thought about the very location that has now been selected. But when the old Glass Palace suddenly came to such a terrible end, all the grief over the irreplaceable loss of the greatest objects of German culture was joined by the danger that the representatives of the worst perversion of art in Germany would end up pre-empting a task that I had already identified, so many years earlier, as one of the most vital tasks of the new Reich.

For, in 1931, the assumption of power by National Socialism was still so far off in an uncertain future that there seemed to be virtually no prospect of reserving the building of this exhibition palace for this Third Reich.

And, in fact, for a while it seemed that the November men would bestow on the Munich art exhibit a building that had little to do with German art and more with the Bolshevik circumstances and conditions of their time. Some of you may still remember the plans they had envisaged back then for the house that is now the splendidly designed Old Botanical Garden. An object very difficult to define. A building that could have just as easily been a Saxon yarn factory as the market hall of a mid-sized city, possibly a train station, or just as readily a swimming pool. I do not need tell you how much I suffered back then from the thought that one disaster [the 1918 fire] would be joined by another one. And that therefore, precisely in this case, I was genuinely pleased – even happy – about the fainthearted indecision of my political opponents at the time. For therein lay perhaps the only chance of being able, in the end, to reserve the new construction of a Munich art exhibition palace for the Third Reich as its first great task.

You will all understand that I am filled these days by the truly painful sorrow that providence did not allow us to witness this day with the man who, immediately after the assumption of power, as one of the greatest of German architects, drew up for me the plans for this structure. When I approached Professor Ludwig Troost, who was already working on various party buildings, with the request to erect an art exhibition building on this site, this exceptional man had already created, in accordance with the call for proposals at the time, a number of grandly conceived sketches for such a structure on the grounds of the Old Botanical Garden. These plans, too, revealed his masterful hand!

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And so what has arisen here is a house that is sufficiently worthy of giving the highest achievements of art an opportunity to show themselves to the German people. Thus, the building of this house aimed at once to represent a turning point and to put an end to the chaotic, bungling attempts at construction that we have left behind. A first new building, one that is to take its honorable place in the immortal achievements of our German art historical life.

But you will also understand now that it is not enough to give to German art this house, which is so respectable, clear, and truthful that we may rightly call it a “House of German Art”; rather, the exhibit itself must also bring about a turning away from the degeneracy that we have witnessed in the arts, sculpture, and painting.

If I now presume to make a judgment here, to express my views and act accordingly, I will first avail myself of the right to do so not only because of my own attitude toward German art, but above all because of my own contribution to its restoration.

For this state today, which I fought for and created with my comrades-in-arms in a long and arduous struggle against a world of adversaries, has also provided German art with the great preconditions for a new and vigorous flowering.

It was not Bolshevik art collectors or their literary followers who created the foundations for a new art or even so much as secured the continuation of art in Germany; no, we did that, we who brought this state into being and have since provided German art with the vast funds it needs for its existence and creation. And above all: we did it because we have assigned great new tasks to art itself.

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Art is in no way fashion. In the same way that little changes in the nature and blood of our people, art, too, must lose its character of transience; instead, in its continuously intensifying creations, it must be a worthy visual expression of the life's course of our people. Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Impressionism, and so on, have nothing to do with our German people. For all of these terms are neither old nor modern, but are simply the stilted stammering of people to whom God has denied real artistic talent and has given instead the gift of blather and deception. I therefore wish to affirm in this hour my immutable resolve to do for German artistic life what I have done in the area of political confusion: to purge it of empty phrases.

“Works of art” that cannot be understood on their own, but rather require a pompous user manual to justify their existence, in order to finally find that intimidated person who will patiently accept such foolish or impudent nonsense – such art works will no longer find their way to the German people!

All these catchphrases, such as: “inner experience,” “a strong conviction,” “forceful intent,” “promising sentiment,” “heroic stance,” “meaningful empathy,” “experienced order of the times,” “primal primitiveness,” and so on, all these stupid, mendacious excuses, phrases, or blather will no longer provide an excuse, let alone a recommendation for creations that are inherently worthless because they are simply inept. Whether someone has a forceful intent or an inner experience is something he may demonstrate with his work, and not with prattling words. We are all much less interested in so-called intent than we are in ability.

Thus, an artist who expects to be exhibited in this house, or to make any public appearance in Germany in the future, must possess skill. Surely, intent is self-evident to begin with! For it would be the very pinnacle of everything if a person were to annoy his fellow citizens with works whereby he actually intended nothing at all. But when these blowhards now try to make their works palatable by presenting them as the expression of a new time, one can only tell them that art does not create new times, but rather that the overall life of nations remakes itself and therefore frequently seeks a new expression. Yet those who have been talking about new art in Germany over the last few decades have certainly not understood the new German times. It is not men of letters who are the creators of a new era, but the fighters, those who are truly

creative, who lead their people and thus make history. But those pitiful, confused dabblers and scribblers will hardly count themselves among them. Moreover, it is either brazen impudence or mystifying stupidity to present, in our day and age, works that could have been made ten or twenty thousand years ago by someone from the Stone Age.

They talk about a primitiveness of art, and they completely forget that it is not the task of art to move away from the development of a people by going backwards, but that its only task can be to symbolize the vitality of that development.

The new age of today is working on a new type of man. Immense efforts are being made in countless spheres of life in order to lift up the people, to render our men, boys and youngsters, girls and women healthier and thus stronger and more beautiful. And out of this strength and this beauty emanates a new feeling of life, a new joy of life!

Never before has humanity been closer to antiquity in its appearance and sensibility than it is today.

[. . .]

This type of man, whom we beheld just last year at the Olympic Games as he appeared before the whole world in his radiant, proud, physical strength and health, this type of man, [I say to you] Mr. Pre-historic Art Stammerers, is the type of the new age. And what are you making? Deformed cripples and cretins, women who can only have a repulsive effect, men who are closer to animals than humans, children who, if they had to live this way, would have to be seen as the veritable curse of God! And this is what these cruel dilettantes dare to present to our world today as the art of our time, namely as the expression of what is shaping this age and imprinting its stamp on it.

Let no one say that these artists see things the same way. Among the paintings submitted here, I have seen many a work where one must in fact assume that the eye shows some people things very differently from the way they are, that is, that there really are men who see the shapes of our people today only as degenerate cretins, who fundamentally sense – or, as they might say: experience – meadows as blue, the sky as green, clouds as sulfur-yellow, and so on. I do not wish to get into an argument over whether or not these individuals truly see and sense it that way. Instead, in the name of the German people I merely want to prohibit these pitiful unfortunates, whose eyesight is clearly suffering, from trying to coercively con their fellow humans into accepting the results of their misconceptions as reality, let alone presenting it to them as “art.”

No, there are but two possibilities here: either these so-called “artists” do in fact see things this way and therefore believe in what they represent, in which case one merely has to examine whether their visual defects were produced in some mechanical way or by heredity. The first case would be deeply regrettable for these unfortunates, the second of importance to the Reich

Ministry of the Interior, which would then have to deal with the question of preventing such horrible visual defects from being passed on. Or they themselves do not believe in the reality of such impressions, but are striving for other reasons to bother the nation with this humbug, in which case such conduct would fall within the realm of criminal justice.

This house, at any rate, was neither planned nor built for the works of these bunglers or abusers of art.

But above all, we did not work on this house for four-and-a-half years, demanding the very best from a thousand workers, only to exhibit the products of people who, to make matters even worse, were lazy enough to spend five hours bespattering a canvas in the firm hope that the boldness of extolling it as the brilliant lightning-stroke of genius would not fail to leave the necessary impression and create the precondition for having it accepted. No, the hard work of the builders of this house and the hard work of its personnel must have its counterpart in the hard work of those who wish to be represented in it. And it does not interest me in the least whether these pseudo-artists will or will not go on to cackle over and thus review each other's eggs!

For the artist does not create for the artist, but like everyone else, he creates for the people! And we will make sure that it is the people who will henceforth be called upon again to judge his art.

For let no one say that the people do not possess the understanding of what is a genuinely valuable enrichment of their cultural life. Long before the critics did justice to the genius of Richard Wagner, he had the people on his side. Conversely, however, in recent years the people no longer had anything to do with the so-called modern art that was presented to them. They had no connection of any kind to it. The great masses walked through our art exhibits completely uninterested or stayed away to begin with. In their healthy sensibility, they saw all these scribblings for what they are, the spawn of an impudent, shameless arrogance or of a truly frightening incompetence. Millions felt with instinctive certainty that the art blather of these last few decades amounted to the clumsy efforts of untalented children eight or ten years old, and cannot, under any circumstances, be regarded as the expression of our time, let alone of Germany's future.

Since we know today that the development of millions of years is repeated in every person compressed into a few decades, we can see in this merely the proof that an artistic production which does not exceed the level of accomplishment of eight-year-old children is not "modern" let alone "seminal," but, on the contrary, very archaic. For it probably goes back even before the period in which Stone Age humans scratched the world they perceived onto cave walls. These bunglers are thus not modern, but ancient people sadly left behind, for whom there no longer is any room in these modern times.

I therefore know that when the German people will now walk through these halls, they will also acknowledge me here as their spokesman and guide, for they will realize that here, for the first times in many decades, we are honoring not artistic fraud, but honest artistic achievement.

In the same way that they are already today giving their approval to our buildings, they will also express, breathing an inner sigh of relief, their joyful agreement with this purification of art.

And that is the crucial thing: for an art which cannot count on the most joyful and heartfelt approval of the healthy, broad masses of the people, but draws its support only from small cliques – some interested, some indifferent – is intolerable. It is trying to confuse the healthy, instinctive feeling of a people, instead of supporting it joyfully.

It therefore creates only irritation and annoyance, and these miserable scoundrels should not dare point out that the great masters of the past were likewise not understood in their time. No, on the contrary. It was at most quibblers, which means once again men of letters, who stood outside of their people as the tormenters and torturers of these geniuses. But we believe, in any case, that the German people will once again stand face to face, in full and joyful understanding, with the truly great German artists that are to come. Most of all, though, they are to appreciate once again honest work and decent effort, as well as the endeavor to respond to our people and its sensibility and serve it from the deepest foundation of the German heart. And that is also a task for our artists. They cannot stand aloof from their people, lest their path lead them inevitably and quickly into lonely isolation.

And so this exhibit today is a beginning. But I am convinced that it is the necessary and promising beginning to bring about also in this area the beneficial change that we have already been able to accomplish in so many other areas. For let no one deceive himself: National Socialism has given itself the task of freeing the German Reich, and thus our people and their life, from all those influences that are pernicious to our existence. And even if this purification cannot happen in a single day, every person or thing that is participating in this perversion should realize that the hour of his elimination will come sooner or later.

But the opening of this exhibit is the beginning of the end of German artistic foolery and thus of the cultural destruction of our people.

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Only the House of German Art in Munich has been built by the German people for its German art.

It is with the greatest pleasure that I can observe today that alongside the many decent older artists, who were previously terrorized and oppressed but who always remained German deep down, new masters are announcing themselves among our young people. A stroll through this exhibit will allow you to find much that will once again appeal to you as beautiful and above all

as respectable, and which you will perceive as good. In particular, the average level of the submitted graphic works was from the outset extraordinarily high and thus satisfying.

From what is being exhibited, many of our young artists will now recognize the path they must take, and perhaps they will also receive new ideas from the greatness of the time in which we are all living, and above all courage for work that is truly diligent and therefore in the end also accomplished.

And once sacred conscientiousness is once again given its due in this area, I have no doubt that out of the mass of these decent artists, the Almighty will once more lift up some to the eternal starry heavens of the immortal, divinely gifted artists of great times. For we do not believe that the time of the creative force of gifted individuals came to an end with the great men of past centuries, and that the future will instead be one of the collective, mush-like masses! No! We believe that especially today, when the greatest individual achievements are proving themselves in so many areas, the highest value of personality will once again make its victorious appearance also in the realm of art.

And so the only wish I can express in this moment is that this new house may be so fortunate, in the coming centuries, to once again be able to reveal to the German people many works by great artists, and in this way contribute not only to the glory of this true city of art, but to the honor and standing of the entire German nation.

I hereby declare the great German Art Exhibit of 1937 in Munich open!

Source: Hitler's Speech at the Opening of the "Great German Art Exhibition" in the House of German Art, Munich (July 18, 1937), in *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 19, 1937, pp. 1ff. Excerpts from the German original German speech are also reprinted in Max Domarus, *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945*. Band I: Zweiter Halbband (1935–1938). R. Löwit: Wiesbaden, 1973, pp. 706-10.

Translation: GHI staff