



Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945 Guide to the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition (1937)

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 32 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 (1892-1959), the exhibition travelled to twelve other 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 done by the mentally retarded and photographs of the physically handicapped. These comparisons 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 only a few meters away.

This exhibition has been assembled by the Reich Propaganda Directorate, Culture Office. It will be shown in the largest cities of all regions. [. . .]

What the "Degenerate Art" exhibition means to do:

It means to give, at the outset of a new age for the German people, a firsthand survey of the gruesome last chapter of those decades of cultural decadence that preceded the great change.

It means to appeal to the sound judgment of the people and thus to put an end to the drivel and claptrap of all those literary cliques and hangers-on, many of whom would still try to deny that we ever had such a thing as artistic degeneracy.

It makes to make it clear that this degeneracy in art was something more than the sort of short-lived foolishness, idiocy, and rash experimentation that might have spent itself and died even without the National Socialist revolution.

It means to show that this was no “necessary ferment” but a deliberate and calculated onslaught upon the very essence and survival of art itself.

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

It means to reveal the philosophical, political, racial, and moral goals and purposes pursued by those who promoted subversion.

It means to show, too, how these symptoms of degeneracy spread from the deliberate troublemakers to infect those more or less unwitting acolytes who, in spite of *previous* – and in some cases also *subsequent*—evidence of artistic talent, were so lacking in *scruple*, *character*, or *common sense* as to join in the general Jewish and Bolshevik furor.

It means to reveal in this way the true peril of a trend that, steered by a few Jewish and openly Bolshevik ringleaders, could success in enlisting such individuals to work toward Bolshevik anarchy in *cultural politics* when those same individuals might well have indignantly denied any affiliation with Bolshevism in *party politics*.

It means to prove above all that *none* of the men who were in any way involved in the degeneracy of art can now turn around and talk about “harmless follies of youth.”

From all this emerges, finally, what the “Degenerate Art” exhibition does *not* mean to do.

It does not mean to assert that *all* the names that are emblazoned on the botched efforts shown here also appeared in the membership lists of the *Communist party*. As *no* such assertion is made, *no refutation* is called for.

It does not mean to deny that one or another of those shown here has at some time – before or since – “achieved something different.” It is not the business of this exhibition, however, to gloss over the fact that in the years of the major Bolshevik-Jewish onslaught upon German art such men stood on the side of subversion.

It does not mean to prevent those artists shown who are of German blood – and who have not followed their former Jewish friends abroad – from now *honestly striving* and *fighting* for the basis of a new and healthy creativity. It *does* and *must* mean to prevent, however, the jabbering cliques from that murky part from foisting any such men on the new state and on its forward-looking people as “the natural standard-bearers of an art of the Third Reich.”

Source of English translation: Stephanie Barron, *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991, pp. 360, 362.
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