



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 officially opened the “Great German Art Exhibition,” which was on view in the House of German Art, a new museum designed by architect Paul Ludwig Troost (1873-1934). It was the first of eight annual exhibitions that aimed to define and display “German art.” The exhibited works were chosen in an open competition; artists Adolf Ziegler, Arno Breker, and Karl Albiker, all of whom were loyal to the regime, originally comprised the jury for the 1937 show. A few weeks before the opening, however, Hitler replaced them with his personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann. Approximately 900 works were exhibited. These included nudes, genre scenes, 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 accommodate 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.

But you understand now that it is not enough merely to provide the House [. . .] the exhibit itself must also bring about a turning point. [. . .] If I presume to make a judgment, speak my opinion, and act accordingly, I do this not just because of my outlook on German art, but I claim this right because of the contribution I myself have made to the restoration of German art. Because our present state, which I and my comrades in the struggle have created, has alone provided German art with the conditions for a new, vigorous flowering.

It was not Bolshevik art collectors or their literary henchmen who laid the foundation for a new art or even secured the continued existence of art in Germany. No, we were the ones who created this state and have since then provided vast sums for the encouragement of art. We have given art great new tasks. [. . .] I declare here and now that it is my irrevocable resolve that just as in the sphere of political bewilderment, I am going to make a clean sweep of phrases in the artistic life of Germany. "Works of art" which cannot be comprehended and are validated only through bombastic instructions for use [. . .] from now on will no longer be foisted upon the German people!

We are more interested in ability than in so-called intent. An artist who is counting on having his works displayed, in this House or anywhere else in Germany, must possess ability. Intent is something that is self-evident. These windbags have tried to make their works more palatable

by representing them as expressions of a new age; but they need to be told that art does not create a new age, that it is the general life of peoples which fashions itself anew and therefore often seeks to express itself anew. [. . .] Men of letters are not the creators of new epochs; it is the fighters, those who truly shape and lead peoples, who make history. [. . .] Aside from that, it is either impudent effrontery or an inscrutable stupidity to exhibit to our own age works that might have been made ten or twenty thousand years ago by a man of the Stone Age. They talk of primitive art, but they forget that it is not the function of art to retreat backward from the level of development a people has already reached. The function of art can only be to symbolize the vitality of this development.

The new age of today is at work on a new human type. Tremendous efforts are being made in countless spheres of life in order to elevate our people, to make our men, boys, lads, girls, and women more healthy and thereby stronger and more beautiful. From this strength and beauty streams forth a new feeling of life, and a new joy in life. Never before was humanity in its external appearance and perceptions closer to the ancient world than it is today.

This type of human, which we saw last year during the Olympic games [. . .] exuding proud physical strength — this my good prehistoric art-stutterers — this is the "type" of the new age. But what do you manufacture? Deformed cripples and cretins, women who inspire only disgust, men who are more like wild beasts, children who, if they were alive, would be regarded as God's curse! [. . .] Let no one say that that is how these artists see things. From the pictures submitted for exhibition, I must assume that the eye of some men shows them things different from the way they really are. There really are men who can see in the shapes of our people only decayed cretins; who feel that meadows are blue, the heavens green, clouds sulfur-yellow. They like to say that they experience these things in this way.

I do not want to argue about whether or not they really experience this. But in the name of the German people I only want to prevent these pitiable unfortunates, who clearly suffer from defective vision, from attempting with their chatter to force on their contemporaries the results of their faulty observations, and indeed from presenting them as "art." Here there are only two possibilities open: either these so-called artists really do see things this way and believe in that which they create — and if so, one has to investigate how this defective vision arose — if it is a mechanical problem or if it came about through heredity. The first case would be pitiable, while the second would be a matter for the Ministry of the Interior, which would then deal with the problem of preventing the perpetuation of such horrid disorders. Or they themselves do not believe in the reality of such impressions, but are for different reasons attempting to annoy the nation with this humbug. If this is the case, then it is a matter for a criminal court.

This House, in any case, was not planned or built for the works of art incompetents or for maltreaters of art. A thousand workmen did not labor for four and a half years on this building only to have creations exhibited here by people who are lazy to excess and who spend but five hours bespattering a canvas, while hoping confidently that the boldness of the pricing would produce the desired effect and result in the hailing of the work as the most brilliant lightning-birth

of a genius. No, the hard work of the builders of this House demands equally hard work from those who want to exhibit here. I do not care in the least if these pseudo-artists then are left to cackle over each other's eggs!

The artist does not create for the artist, but for the people! We will see to it that from here on the people will be called on to judge their own art. No one must say that the people have no appreciation for a truly valuable enrichment of its cultural life. Long before the critics did justice to the genius of a Richard Wagner he had the people on his side. For their part, however, during the last few years the people have had no affinity for the so-called modern art that was placed before them. The mass of the people moved through our art exhibits in a completely uninterested fashion or stayed away altogether. The people's healthy perceptions recognized that all these smearings of canvas were really the outcome of an impudent and unashamed arrogance or of a simply shocking lack of skill. Millions of people felt instinctively that these art-stammerings of the last few decades were more like the achievements that might have been produced by untalented children of from eight to ten years old and could under no circumstances be regarded as the expression of our own time or of the German future.

Since we know today that the development of millions of years repeats itself in every individual but is compressed into a few decades, we have the proof that an artistic creation that does not surpass the achievement of eight-year-old children is not "modern" or even "futuristic" but is, on the contrary, highly archaic. It probably is not as developed as the art of the Stone Age period, when people scratched pictures of their environment on the walls of caves. [. . .]

I know, therefore, that when the *Volks* passes through these galleries it will recognize in me its own spokesman and counselor [. . .] it will draw a sigh of relief and joyously express its agreement with this purification of art. And this is decisive, for an art that cannot count on the ready inner agreement of the broad, healthy mass of the people, but which must instead rely on the support of small, partially indifferent cliques, is intolerable. [. . .] We are convinced that the German people will again fully support and joyously appreciate the future truly great artists from within their ranks. [. . .]

This exhibition then is but a beginning. [. . .] But the opening of this exhibit is also the beginning of the end of the stultification of German art and the end of the cultural destruction of our people. [. . .] Many of our young artists will recognize the path they will have to take; they will draw inspiration from the greatness of the time in which we all live, and they will draw the courage to work hard and will in the end complete the task. And when a sacred conscientiousness at last comes into its own, then, I have no doubt, the Almighty will lift from this mass of decent creators of art, several individuals who will rise to the eternal star-covered heaven of immortal, God-favored artists of great ages. [. . .] We believe that especially today, when in so many spheres the highest individual achievements are standing the test, so also in the sphere of art will the highest value of personality again emerge to assert itself.

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