

# The University of Mississippi Undergraduate Research Journal

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Volume 1

Article 13

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4-1-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Jessie (2016) "An Ethical Atrocity - Entartete Kunst and the Manipulation of Art in Nazi," *The University of Mississippi Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umurjournal/vol1/iss1/13>

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## An Ethical Atrocity:

### Entartete Kunst and the Manipulation of Art in Nazi

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The question of ethical actions in the art world connects to multiple cultural, political, and historical aspects of a piece or an exhibit. The production and selection of art as an end to a means for political power results in the manipulation of it, whether by its promotion or persecution. In Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, the world looked on with horror as the National Socialists seized massive amounts of art as a device to “further [Hitler’s] political objectives against Jews, Communists, and non-Aryans,” among others.<sup>34</sup> Instead of admiring and promoting art for the sake of art, Hitler and the Nazi regime sought out to generalize art as German or degenerate and to purify art history of any art potentially harmful to the implementation of the changes in culture of the National Socialist regime. The reasons behind the seizure of art displayed in the *Entartete Kunst* show in Munich in 1937 range from political to personal and the manifestations of these reasons in the exhibit caught the interest of people across the globe.

Though it seems like quite an unrealistic exhibition to take place now, the *Entartete Kunst* art exhibition made complete sense in the minds of the people executing the collecting and selecting of the art pieces. “*Entartete kunst*” literally

translates to “degenerate art”. The more expansive definition of what qualifies as degenerate is “Those [pieces or people] that either ‘insult German feeling, or destroy or confused natural form, or simply reveal an absence of adequate manual and artistic skill.’”<sup>35</sup> At the root of this mass condemnation of art of a wide variety of genres and artists based on relatively subjective criteria lies the unusually spiteful spirit of one man and promoted by his following of the National Socialists in Germany. This is one of the most outstanding examples of “...government repression of progressive thinking and creativity, and, by extension, shorthand for censorship or suppression of the arts in general.”<sup>36</sup> Through various changes in the policies of government regarding art and other cultural aspects, the National Socialists sought to completely change the course of art history and purify the existing art in Germany. The art genocide did not only target non-German artists; but also aimed to completely obliterate all traces of modernism, Expressionism, Dada, New Objectivity, Futurism, Cubism, and other genres of art seen as a challenge to the regime.<sup>37</sup> Hitler and his associates, especially his Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, made a series of proclamations and set new precedents for

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<sup>34</sup> Barron, Stephanie, and Peter W. Guenther. *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany*. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Barron, Stephanie and Peter W. Guenther. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Wilkin, Karen. "Degenerate Art in New York." Review of *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*. *The New Criterion* 32 (June 2014): 42.

<sup>37</sup> Barron and Guenther, 18

what would be accepted in expression from that point forward. Only art that the Fuehrer and his associates evaluated as acceptable gained official approval and to ensure that only that art would exist after the institution of the new culture, the National Socialists proclaimed to the public that

1. All works of a cosmopolitan or Bolshevist nature should be removed from German museums and collections, but first they should be exhibited to the public, who should be informed of the details of their acquisition, and then burned.
2. All museum directors who "wasted" public monies by purchasing "un-German" art should be fired immediately.
3. No artist with Marxist or Bolshevist connections should be mentioned henceforth.
4. No Boxlike buildings should be built [an assault on Bauhaus architecture].
5. All public sculptures not "approved" by the German public should be immediately removed [this applied to Barlach].<sup>38</sup>

The extreme measures that the National Socialists implemented are overwhelmingly negative, outlawing particular styles or artists or associated people. One of the simplest explanations for this rather violent dismissal of such a massive amount of art is simply that Hitler did not see it as art. The Fuehrer's rejection for admission from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts on two separate occasions tainted his concept of Art.<sup>39</sup> After that repeated personal tragedy, Hitler's concept of more controversial and inventive art grows to be one of

rejection instead of appreciation. One man's very biased opinion, broadcast and forced upon the people, attempted to rid art history of some of the greatest modern artists known today in the name of national purity.

While the National Socialists vehemently sought to oppress all types of art of which they did not approve, the party also promoted the "truly" German works deemed fit by the Fuehrer and associates. Though many artists felt attacked even without direct attacks on their work, the only route to success under the oppressive Nazi regime was with endorsement from the Nazi regime itself. With the implementation of Hitler's proclamations mentioned above, artists could either adapt within four years or flee.<sup>40</sup> Artists typically have no guarantee of success or guaranteed income, so the challenge of fleeing without any idea of life beyond Germany could often be more frightening than compromising one's artistic freedom. In the book *Culture Under the Nazis*, Dorothy Thompson explains the plight of the artist in Germany: "Day by day he is forced to ask himself: 'Shall I compromise or shall I perish?'"<sup>41</sup> Many artists found that Nazi endorsement was much more profitable and promising than Nazi exile.

The artists officially endorsed by the National Socialist authorities found their pieces featured prominently in the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, or The Big German Art Show. The overlap of time of exhibition may be the one thing that *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* shares in common with *Entartete Kunst*. This showcase of heroic workers, classicizing nudes, portraits of Hitler, pride in Germany, and other Nazi-approved art not only contrasts with the Degenerate Art show in content but also in exhibition environment.<sup>42</sup> In *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Dr. Edward Yarnall Hartshorne, a Harvard professor, shares

<sup>38</sup> Barron and Guenther, 13

<sup>39</sup> Wilkin, 42.

<sup>40</sup> Barron and Guenther, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, Dorothy. "Culture under the Nazis." *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 3 (April 01, 1936): 414.

<sup>42</sup> Wilkin, 43.

Hitler's description of the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* where the Big German Art show was displayed as "...the first new building worthy to take its place among the immortal achievements of the German artistic heritage" and this grandeur continued the trend of the previous art shows in the Munich *Glaspalast* (Glass Palace).<sup>43</sup> With the placement of the approved art in such a monumental and special building, the National Socialists sought to attract as many people as possible to see the greatness of approved German art. While the Big German Art show saw somewhere between four hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand visitors, it seems that neither the building nor the contents of artists now nearly unknown made as much of an impact as the National Socialists had intended.<sup>44</sup>

The manner in which the Nazi regime went about acquiring the pieces for both the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* and *Entartete Kunst* is extremely unethical, besides being mostly illegal, by modern standards. In the year of 1937, following a series of smaller local art exhibitions around Germany, the following proclamation forced the German people to surrender their art without questions:

On the express authority of the Fuhrer I hereby empower the president of the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste, Professor Ziegler of Munich, to select and secure for an exhibition works of German degenerate art since 1910, both painting and sculpture, which are now in collections owned by the German Reich, individual regions or local communities. You are requested to give Prof. Ziegler your full support during his examination and selection of these works.<sup>45</sup>

Without any repercussions because of a later retroactive law legalizing these blatant incidences of misconduct, the Nazis overstepped these already invasive authorizations for art confiscation by trespassing, harassing, and collecting pre-1910 works.<sup>46</sup> As the Nazis held all power, there were very few authorities that had any real chance at preventing these atrocities.

Acquisitions continued until 1938 and by that date, there was little to do to repair the damage done by this mass confiscation of art.<sup>47</sup> Over twenty thousand pieces came into the hands of the Nazis from museums, individuals, and areas of "public domain" and not all of these pieces could possibly fit into the *Entartete Kunst* exhibit, as much as it would have delighted Hitler.<sup>48</sup> The work of Chagall, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Vassily Kandinsky, and other masters of modern art either went into consideration for condemnation in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibit, general storage, or *Schreckenskammern der Kunst* (chambers of horror of art) in complete disregard of any credit these works previously held in the German art world.<sup>49</sup>

In Munich in 1937 to the delight of the National Socialists, the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition opened. Though the thoughts leading up to this exhibition far predate its opening, it took less than two weeks for the Nazis to confiscate, transport, sort through and install works selected from over twenty thousand pieces.<sup>50</sup> Two weeks is a remarkably short span of time to assemble an exhibit, but upon viewing the Degenerate Art show it quickly became clear how the Nazis achieved this feat. Rather than displaying the works in the beautiful *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*, they were "...expediently crowded into a far-from-splendid existing building [in a] concentrated government-sponsored assault on

<sup>43</sup> Barron and Guenther, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Barron and Guenther, 18. Wilkin, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Barron and Guenther, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Barron and Guenther, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Barron and Guenther, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Fleckner, 140.

<sup>49</sup> Wilkin, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Barron and Guenther, 20.

vanguard tendencies.”<sup>51</sup> While the initial impression of the building gave visitors an obvious hint of the lack of respect the Nazis had for these pieces, the arrangements and displays of pieces further imparted the sense of disdain the Nazis felt to visitors. Even with a brief investigation of photos from the original exhibit, one can observe many of the disgraces the Nazis placed on these pieces: lack of frames, titles and information hurriedly scribbled next to pieces, displeasing displays of works, haphazard hanging, and quotes from Hitler and others about the “*entartete*” qualities of the pieces, if their presentation did not make it clear enough.<sup>52</sup>

The inclusion and exclusion of two major elements of an exhibition, provenance and a catalogue, made a notable impact on the *Entartete Kunst* show. Germany had a reputation in the art world for conscientious provenance research in years leading up to the exhibition, but in the case of Degenerate Art, this research presented the piece as ridiculous and the original curator or owner as foolish. For each piece, the Nazis made sure to include the price at which each piece was acquired, the date on which it was acquired, and the name of the curator responsible for the acquisition.<sup>53</sup> While traditionally, provenance was an indication of the “pedigree” of a work, in this case it was used against the piece and the people behind it.<sup>54</sup> In listing the prices of the works, the Nazis conveniently neglected to mention the “radical postwar inflation” that made a dollar worth over four billion marks in 1920, making the people who purchased the pieces appear even more ridiculous.<sup>55</sup>

The omission of a catalogue from *Entartete Kunst* that would read as a list of top modern artists as regarded in modern art history left viewers and posterity without a record of these horrific creations, further demeaning them within the span of art history. While the exhibit did not officially open with a catalogue of every evil piece within it, when it changed over to a travelling exhibit the Nazis constructed a *ausstellungsfuhrer*, or exhibition guide.<sup>56</sup> This record is not entirely correct in the pieces it includes, replacing some works with similar pieces by the same artist, but it does incorporate the ideas behind the exhibit through excerpts from Hitler’s many speeches criticizing the art.<sup>57</sup> Whether viewers saw the travelling exhibit or the original show, it is obvious from the modern acknowledgements of the exhibit the impact that it had.

After the viewing of the exhibit by over three million people, the Nazis had to figure out what to do with the massive amount of degenerate art now in their possession. The obvious solutions were to either destroy, gift, or sell the pieces, though some got lost in the process of dissolving the exhibition. Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, went so far as to create a commission for the “disposal of confiscated works of degenerate art” to decide which pieces should be sold and which were trash.<sup>58</sup> Obviously, having just one group of people in charge of deciding the fate of modern masterpieces is not an ethical decision in today’s art market in the least. The pieces that did not go to burn could go to decorate public buildings and offices, to the homes of Nazi elite, or to auction or private sale.<sup>59</sup> Though according to a directive from the all-powerful

<sup>51</sup> Wilkin, 42.

<sup>52</sup> Feigenbaum and Reist, Barro & Guenther, Wilkin

<sup>53</sup> Fleckner, Uwe. "Marketing the Defamed: On the Contradictory Use of Provenances in the Third Reich." Edited by Inge Reist. In *Provenance: An Alternative History of Art*, edited by Gail Feigenbaum, 137-47. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012. 140.

<sup>54</sup> Feigenbaum, Gail, and Inge Jackson Reist. *Provenance: An Alternative History of Art*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012. 100.

<sup>55</sup> Barron and Guenther, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Barron and Guenther, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Barron and Guenther, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Barron and Guenther, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Barron and Guenther, 18.

government in 1939 stating that all records of provenance for a piece must be destroyed before the delivery of a piece to the purchaser, there was a selective process behind keeping or discarding provenance for various works.<sup>60</sup> Germany needed foreign currency and knew that by including the provenance of a piece it would fetch a higher price in any sale, but by including the provenance that would acknowledge the painting or sculpture's legitimacy.<sup>61</sup> There are explicit examples of Nazi authorities both acknowledging the value of degenerate art and advising in ways to profit from provenance meant to be destroyed.<sup>62</sup>

Not only were the three million people from German public that visited the show enthralled by the *Entartete Kunst* exhibit, the world outside the Nazi regime took an interest as well. When American collectors and curators heard of a German art auction of degenerate art, they called for the auction to be boycotted for reasons that most of the art was likely to have been looted.<sup>63</sup> A writer at the time of the exhibition living in the United States wrote that the works that German artists made under Nazi rule was "...hack stuff, as made to order as a Hearst editorial on communism."<sup>64</sup> It is clear that this oppression of art did not go without notice. The general reactions among art historians and those involved in art sales was a massive demand for provenance history, going so far to result in a call by political leaders for a comprehensive provenance history of all works acquired since 1933.<sup>65</sup> Unlike the interest Germans took in finding the provenance for each piece in *Entartete Kunst*, they now viewed provenance research as a "not particularly purposeful type of research."<sup>66</sup>

Fortunately, individuals and outside forces have taken it upon themselves to track down lost works of art and seek out the provenance for pieces in their possession. Pieces go back to their owners or family of the original owner on multiple occasions today rather than rotting away in the *Schreckenskammern der Kunst* chambers for eternity.

In the return of some of these paintings and sculptures, the recipient of the piece has little to no attachment or even has disdain for the work. Because the seizure of the works was so long ago, often times the recipient may have no connection to the painting or sculpture whatsoever other than that their relative owned it at one point in time. In the cases of lower levels of personal interest, people have realized that these *Entartete Kunst* pieces can pull a high price at market, especially with provenance. Kirchner's *Street Dresden* returned to the owners in Germany, but then almost immediately sold at auction for thirty eight million dollars.<sup>67</sup> Another Kirchner, *Berlin Street Scene*, brought almost double the estimate at auction. Max Liebermann's *Summer Evening on the Alster* was "estimated to fetch \$1.2 million to \$1.9 million at Sotheby's London sale."<sup>68</sup> While many people have made massive profits from these pieces of degenerate art, all reactions to these sales are not positive because of the provenance and persecuted past. Due to the complicated past of many of these paintings and sculptures revolving around the *Entartete Kunst* exhibit and Nazi regime, reputable auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's investigate all works consigned to them before 1945.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Fleckner, 144-145.

<sup>61</sup> Fleckner, 144-145.

<sup>62</sup> Fleckner, 147.

<sup>63</sup> Fleckner, 147.

<sup>64</sup> Thompson, 419.

<sup>65</sup> Stockhausen, Tillmann Von. "The Failure of Provenance Research in Germany." Edited by Inge Reist. In *Provenance: An Alternative History of*

*Art*, edited by Gail Feigenbaum, 124-32. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012. 123.

<sup>66</sup> Stockhausen, 125.

<sup>67</sup> Stockhausen, 129.

<sup>68</sup> Lane, Mary. "Art Stolen by Nazis Goes to Auction." *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Lane.

One of the most interesting reactions to *Entartete Kunst* is not a mass protest, but a modern adaptation of the exhibition. In 2014, The Neue Galeries opening their own Degenerate Art show, including many of the original works from the exhibition and substituting those pieces that they could not attain with pieces from the same artist.<sup>70</sup> Rather than prosecute the works of art representing a major change in styles, Neue Galeries explained the reasons for the original inclusion of each work and also includes pieces from the Big German Art Show and Degenerate Art Show side by side for direct comparison. With this placement side by side, viewers can attempt to discern the often-minute differences in degenerate and truly German. In some instances of selecting pieces for the original exhibit, one spontaneous decision could condemn a piece and ruin an artist. The Neue Galeries did release a catalog with the opening of the exhibition; the catalogue is a major step up from the original lack of one, but it still could not be entirely consistent with the original

exhibition due to the fact that the 1937 show had no master list.

Using art as a manipulative tool for propagandistic and personal gains is not obsolete. However, the shocking example of *Entartete Kunst* is such a massive pock in the cultural advancement of Germany that it stands out in the global records of art history and oppression. Though the Nazis had their reasons in assembling these works of art, justified by their political principles, the rest of the world has come to recognize the ethical atrocities of the exhibition. With the generation of the Degenerate Art show in the Neue Galeries came a blatant acknowledgment of how horrific this attempt at art genocide truly was. The manner in which the Nazis acquired the massive amount of works without regard, the manner in which the Nazis displayed the works in complete disdain and mockery, and the manner in which the Nazis dissolved the exhibit seeking profit without any persecution all contribute to the ethical horrors of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition.

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<sup>70</sup> Wilkin, 43.

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