

# Degenerate Art



## RESOURCE FOR AGES 15-18 IN ART

### Teacher's Resource Sheet: Degeneracy and Nazi Ideology in the 1920s and 1930s

from Stephanie Barron, ed. *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art/New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1991)

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The *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition)* and *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate art)* did not occur as isolated incidents. The issues raised, the fusion of political and aesthetic themes, and the use of the term *entartet* to designate supposedly inferior racial, sexual, and moral types had been in the air for several years. (*Entartet*, which has traditionally been translated as "degenerate" or "decadent" is essentially a biological term, defining a plant or animal that has so changed that it no longer belongs to its species. By extension, it refers to art that is unclassifiable or so far beyond the confines of what is accepted that it is in essence "non-art.")

The events leading up to 1937 had their roots in German cultural history long before the National Socialist party was formed. The year 1871 marked both the emergence of the German empire and the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, a book later used to justify German racism. As a unified country Germany became prone to an intense nationalism that manifested itself quite often as a belief in the natural superiority of the Aryan people. The myth of the blond, blue-eye Nordic hero as the embodiment of the future of Western civilization was promoted in the writings of several European authors of the early twentieth century, including Count Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Hans Gunther, and Alfred Rosenberg. In the decade between 1910 and 1920 the concept of racism had achieved popularity in the middle class. By the 1920s certain authors argued that racial characteristics and art were linked and attempted to "prove" that the style of a work of art was determined by the race of the artist.

This period in German history also saw the efflorescence of modern art, literature, film and music created by individuals who would be labeled "degenerate" in the 1930s. German art virtually exploded in a series of events in



Berlin, Dresden, and Munich. The emergence of the artists' groups Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Reiter (The blue rider), the publication of important radical periodicals to which artists contributed, and the intense response by artists and writers to the cataclysmic events of the First World War characterized the first phase of German Expressionism. These artists and writers were also drawn to the exotic: the carvings and wall hangings of African and Oceanic peoples that the Brücke artists saw in the Dresden Volkekunde-Museum (Ethnographic Museum), for example, or the art of the insane that served as inspiration for the poetry and prose of such esteemed authors as Hugo Ball, Alfred Döblin and Wieland Herzfelde. In the wake of the war avant-garde German art came increasingly into conflict with the nationalistic realism that was more easily understood by the average German. The country had experienced a humiliating defeat and had been assessed for huge war reparations that grievously taxed its already shaky economy. Movements such as Expressionism, Cubism, and Dada were often viewed as intellectual, elitist, and foreign by the demoralized nation and linked to the economic collapse, which was blamed on a supposed international conspiracy of Communists and Jews. Many avant-garde artists continued their involvement in Socialism during the turbulent Weimar era and made their sentiments known through their art. This identification of the more abstract art movements with internationalism and progressive politics created highly visible targets for the aggressive nationalism that gave birth to the National Socialist party; even as institutions such as the Bauhaus school moved into the cultural mainstream and German museums exhibited more and more avant-garde work.

Concurrent with important artistic developments, pseudoscientific treatises such as Max Nordau's *Entartung* (Degeneration) of 1892 were enjoying renewed popularity. Nordau, himself a Jew, wrote a ponderous text vilifying the Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, Henrik Ibsen, and Emile Zola, among others, as he sought to prove the superiority of traditional German culture. In 1895 George Bernard Shaw had written a brilliant and scathing review of Nordau's book, one of several responses provoked internationally. Unfortunately, the criticism had little impact on the architects of Nazi ideology. *Entartung* and other racist works took the widely accepted view that nineteenth-century realistic genre painting represented the culmination of a long tradition of true Aryan art. Even before they obtained a majority in the Reichstag (Parliament), disgruntled theorists and polemicists had written and spoken of how "good German art" was being overrun by "degenerates, Jews, and other insidious influences." The avant-garde artist was equated to the insane, who in turn was synonymous with the Jew: the nineteenth century founders of German psychiatry felt that the Jew was inherently degenerate and more susceptible than the non-Jew to insanity. As Sander Gilman has pointed out, the classifications of "degenerate" and "healthy" appeared for the first time in the late nineteenth-century; by the late 1930s they were fairly standard in discussions about the avant-garde and the traditional.

Opposition to the wave of avant-garde activities in German museums had begun



in the 1920s with the founding of the Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft (German art association), which had as its goals a "common action against the corruption of art" and the promotion of an "art that was pure German, with the German soul reflecting art." They attacked exhibitions of the works of Beckmann, Grosz, and other proponents of "Kulturbolschewismus" (art-Bolshevism). In 1927 Rosenberg, the chief architect of Nazi cultural policy, founded the Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur (Combat League for German culture), which had the same goals as the Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft. It was at first an underground organization, but with the rise of National Socialism it worked openly with the party leadership. In 1930 Rosenberg wrote *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe* (The myth of the twentieth century: An evaluation of the spiritual-intellectual confrontations of our age), in which he denounced Expressionism and other modern art forms: "Creativity was broken because it had oriented itself, ideologically and artistically, toward a foreign standard and thus was no longer attuned to the demands of life."

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