

The triumph of the banal: art in Nazi Germany

In Munich on 18 July 1937, to the accompaniment of lengthy speech-making and elaborate ceremonial, Adolf Hitler opened the first exhibition ever held in the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* ('House of German Art'). The *Haus der deutschen Kunst* was a spacious, well-lit gallery designed in a robust version of the neo-classical style by Hitler's favourite architect Paul Ludwig Troost, previously best known for his luxurious interiors in several transatlantic liners. The new gallery replaced the famous Munich *Glaspalast*, a brilliantly engineered structure of iron and glass, which, until it burned down in 1931, had served a variety of purposes, not least the annual staging of the most important exhibition of contemporary art in southern Germany, the *Grosse Kunstausstellung* ('Big Art Exhibition'.) Now the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* was continuing the interrupted tradition; but the exhibition of 1937, renamed the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (and the addition of the *deutsch* – 'German' – is, of course, significant) was rather different from its predecessors: it consisted exclusively of art that was to the Government's taste.

The exhibition of 1937 was the first of a series which continued annually without a break until 1944. Although Munich was not the administrative capital of Germany, it was for all Nazis the *Hauptstadt der Bewegung* ('Capital of the Movement') and the national cultural centre. These exhibitions, unlike their frankly provincial predecessors, were therefore of truly national significance. For the visual arts they were the outstanding event of every year. Painters and sculptors realised that their careers depended on showing their work there and resorted to every possible ruse to ensure that they did so.

No one was left in any doubt about the importance placed on the Munich exhibitions by the authorities. Each show, even in the grim, penultimate year of the war, was opened by the Führer himself who almost

always took the opportunity to make a major speech on a cultural topic. Each exhibition was extensively covered by the press and in the cinema newsreels. Although many other shows of similar art were regularly held throughout Germany, these *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellungen* were far and away the most significant. They were larger than any other; they regularly attracted large numbers of visitors; and their duration was unusually long: six months was the norm. They were also the only such exhibitions to be hung in a purpose-built gallery designed in a government-approved style, providing the opportunity to view Nazi-inspired painting and sculpture against the background of a building shaped to embody the Fascist virtues.

We need look no further than the exhibits in the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* of any year to gain an impression of both the style and subject-matter of the art which the Nazi Government encouraged. Every year the walls of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* were hung with paintings showing women who, both clothed and naked, embodied the Nazi ideal of Nordic physical beauty and, as Leda or Diana, gave that ideal a respectable, time-honoured pedigree (Fig. 8). Uniformed men in battle advertised the virtues of heroism and fortitude (Fig. 9). Peasants at work in the fields or relaxing at home announced the benefits of the simple life or illustrated the charm of regional costume (Fig. 10). Great moments in the nation's history such as the Battle of Tannenberg were dramatically recalled. Great moments in the party's history such as the Führer's imprisonment in the fortress of Landsberg zu Lech were presented in histrionic fashion. The German landscape was lovingly described, frequently, as when eagles were shown wheeling over Alpine peaks, in a fashion pregnant with meaning (an oak tree was a similarly loaded image.) Paintings of steelworks, dams under construction (Fig. 11), aircraft factories and autobahn bridges expressed and invited pride in the nation's material and military progress; while sculptures in the round and relief employed classical conventions on a monumental and often gigantic scale in order to suggest parallels between the Third Reich and Imperial Rome at the height of its influence (Fig. 12). Sculpture was indeed accorded an importance even greater than that given to painting, a logical result of its public character and of the major role it assumed in Nazi Germany as a vital component of architecture. Finally and inevitably, portraits of Adolf Hitler and his ministers presented their subjects in both two and three dimensions as determined, enlightened and inspired.

The subjects of the works shown at the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellungen* were more varied than the styles in which they were depicted. These styles were by no means uniform, however, and ranged from a consistently

sharp-focus treatment of a myriad of tiny details to a softer, more suggestive kind of description; but they were all, in essence, varieties of Naturalism, and thus intended to be instantly accessible to the widest possible public. All of them gave the visitor, however unsophisticated, a reassuring sense of familiar, enduring values. No conventional view, either of art or of art history, was challenged; no unconventional view was permitted to disturb the mirrored surface of optimism and contentment. There was an absence of problems: no one had any trouble recognising what was represented or understanding what was being said.

Oskar Martin-Amorbach's *Evening Peace* (Fig. 10) was shown at the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* of 1944 and is a prime example, not simply of contemporary German painting of its type, but of Nazi-approved art in general. It is, of course, a kind of pastoral. The mood is calm, contented. Yet the relaxation described speaks clearly of work well done, and so does the title. The period is imprecise. It might be 1944 or 1844. The skill of the painter is manifest. The detail, the high technical accomplishment, would impress anyone for whom artistic achievement is synonymous with evidence of industry and the ability to create a convincing illusion of reality.

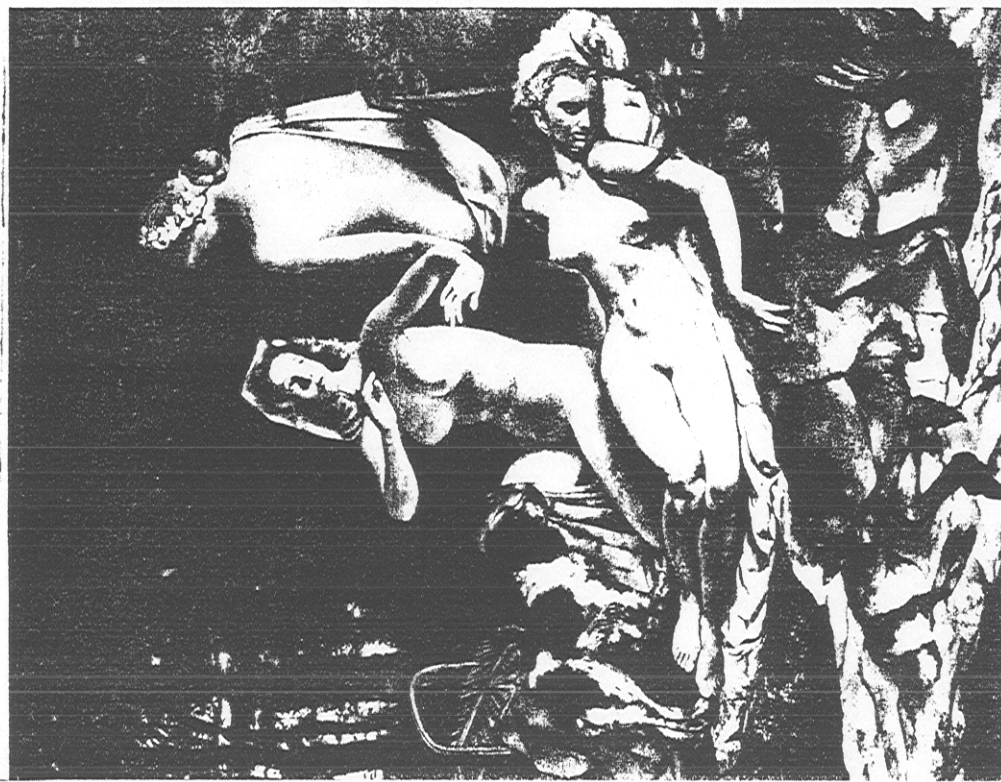
The message communicated by this painting is clear: labour has its reward; the old values, the simple rural life close to the soil are to be preferred to modern, sophisticated urban habits. The past is evoked in another way. Martin-Amorbach's painting belongs to a German (and specifically south German) tradition which has its roots in the paintings of peasants of Wilhelm Leibl, who was deeply impressed by Courbet's work when he saw it in an exhibition at the Munich *Glaspalast* in 1864.

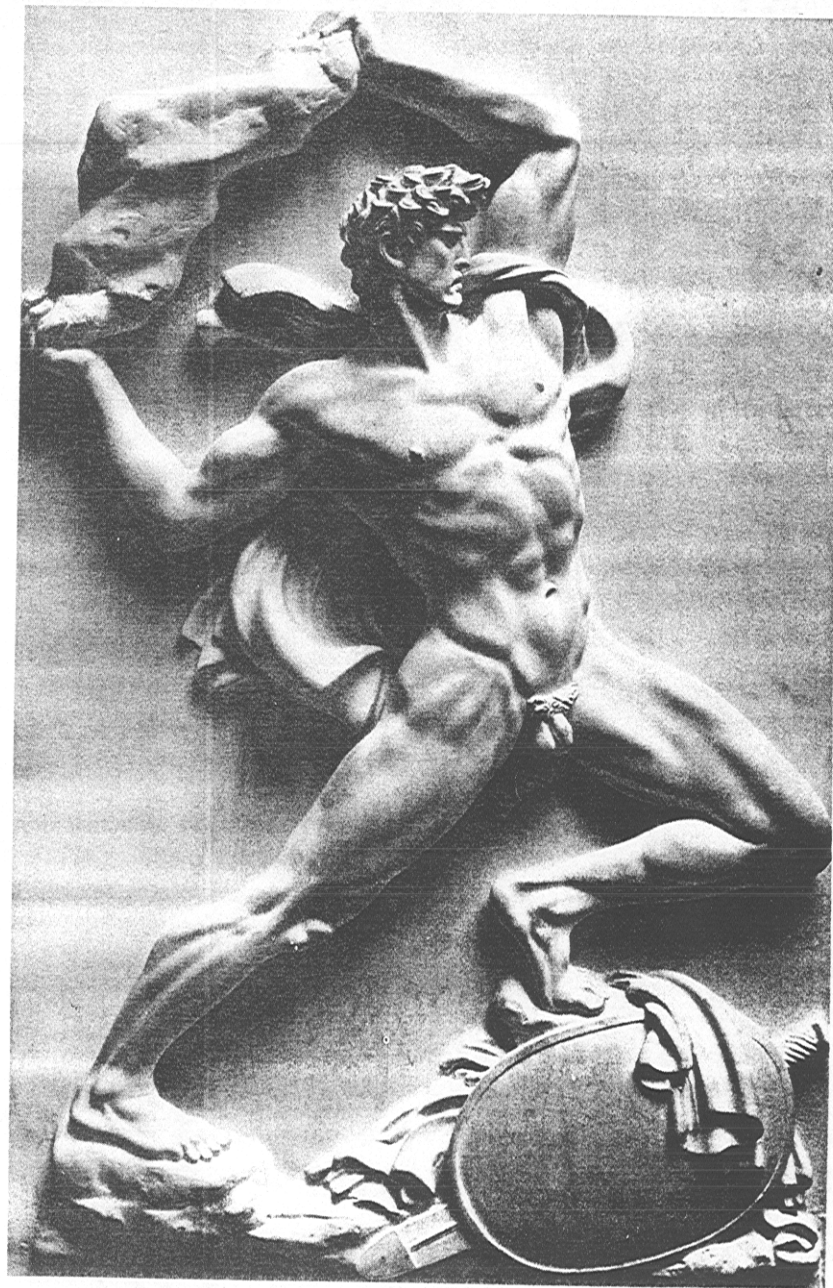
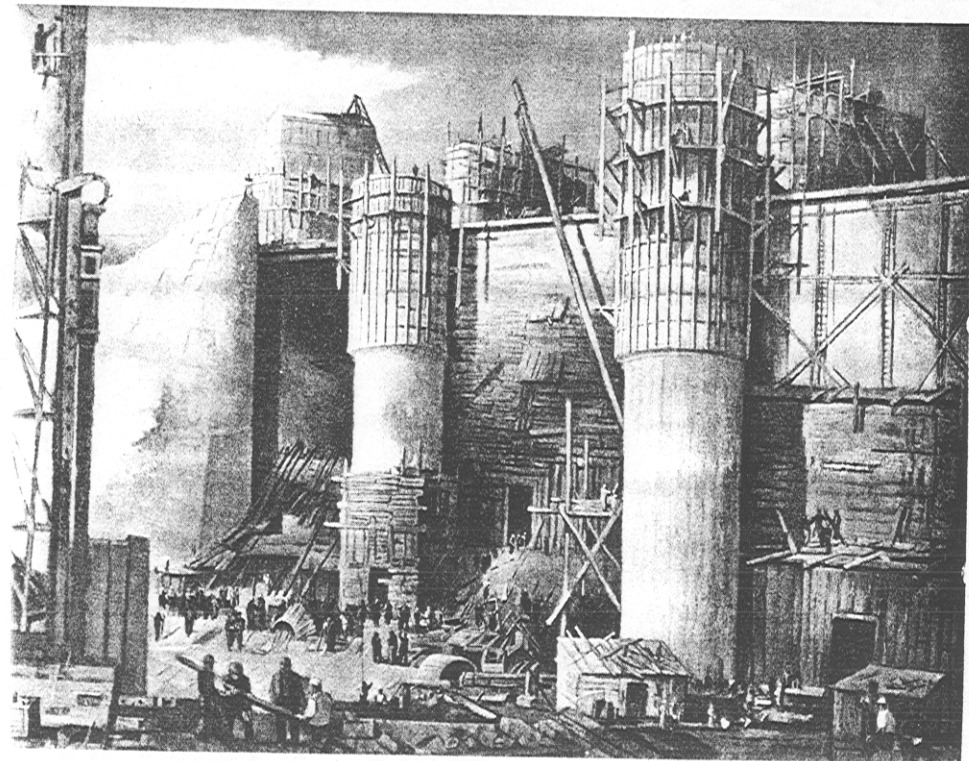
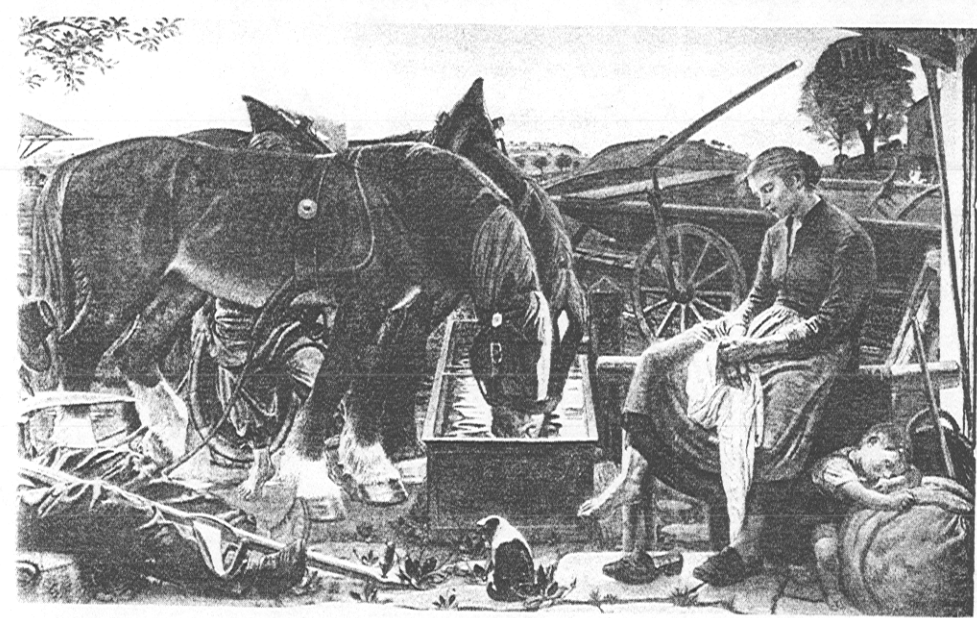
There is a narrative element in such paintings by Leibl as *The Village Politicians* (1877, Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur) and *Three Women in Church* (1882, *Kunsthalle*, Hamburg) which, entirely absent from similar works by Courbet, verges on the sentimental. In Martin-Amorbach's *Evening Peace* the narrative has degenerated into anecdote, the sugar-sweetness of which, exemplified by the cat washing its paws and the child sucking his thumb in sleep, betrays a general lack of sincerity. We do not need to be reminded of what was happening in the real world while this false idyll was being created, in order to hear its hollow ring.

II

On 19 July 1937, the day following the inauguration of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst*, Adolf Hitler opened another art exhibition in Munich.

(facing 8) Padua, *Sleeping Diana* (and 9) Lipus, *Warriors*





(facing 10) Martin-Amorbach, *Evening Peace* (and 11) Gessner, *Castles of our Time*
(this page 12) Breker, *Revenge*

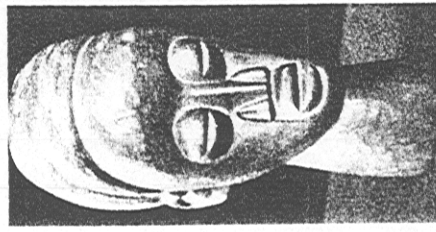
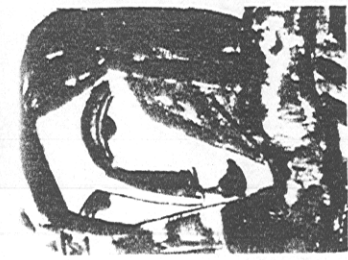
The publicity which attended this event was possibly greater than that attracted by the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung*. Also devoted to contemporary art, the second exhibition was dramatically different from the first. Hung in badly-lit rooms in the Hofgarten Arcade a few steps to the rear of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst*, it consisted not only of badly-hung paintings and sculpture, but also of placards on which texts and sensational photographs urged the visitor to make comparisons between, for example, the works on show and the products of both the mentally deranged and the primitive tribes of Africa and Oceania (Figs. 13 & 14). The treatment of faces and bodies in some of the painting and sculpture was similarly compared to the appearance of the physically deformed. The title of this exhibition, unique in the history of art, was the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* – the ‘Degenerate Art Exhibition’.

If the exhibition at the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* presented examples of government-approved art, the sideshow in the Hofgarten Arcade was intended, as its title implied, to be a chamber of horrors. Here was eloquent proof of the lunacy, disease and danger which the Nazi Party had been founded to combat; here was abundant evidence of the cancer at the heart of German society which it was committed to eradicate.

Between the placards the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* showed the work of artists who, until comparatively recently, had been widely regarded in Germany and abroad as modern masters and were represented in many of the world’s most important museums: painters such as Nolde, Kirchner and Kokoschka; sculptors such as Barlach, Lehbruck and Marcks. Their work, by almost total contrast to that in the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung*, was heterogeneous in the extreme. Brilliant colours, exaggerated forms and energetic handling characterised many of the paintings, while the sculptures employed unnatural proportions and, in conventional terms, showed scant respect for technique. Nor were the subjects easy to categorise. Some of the work was non-figurative; some of it was politically inspired; some of it took remarkable liberties with the appearance of the human form; much of it was extremely subjective. All of it was challenging, unsettling and difficult. Most of it seemed to issue a strident challenge to all familiar categories of thought and to the conventional mind at home in them. All of it belonged to state and other public collections and had recently been confiscated.

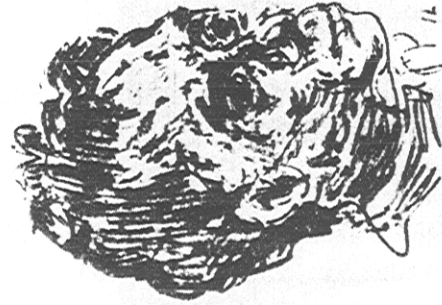
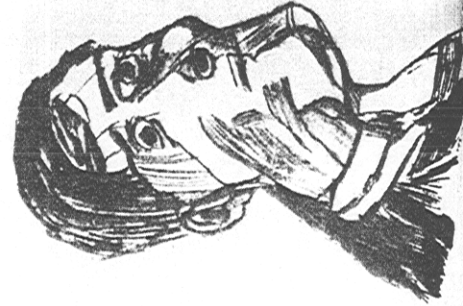
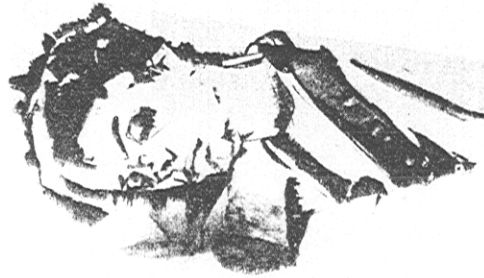
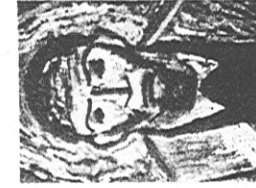
The two Munich exhibitions of 1937 were the clearest and best advertised expressions of official government policy towards the visual arts in Nazi Germany. Never has a government worked so hard to encourage the art of which it approved, or to suppress that by which it felt threatened. Hitler, who had unsuccessfully applied to study at the Art Academy in

(facing 13) From the catalogue of ‘Degenerate Art’: works by Kokoschka and by a lunatic (and 14) From the catalogue of ‘Degenerate Art’: works by Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Morgner, Dix and Kirchner



Ein sehr aufschlussreicher
**rassischer
Querschnitt**

Man beachte besonders auch die unten stehenden drei Malerbildnisse. Es sind von links nach rechts: Der Maler Morgner, gesehen von sich selbst. Der Maler Radziwill, gesehen von Otto Dix. Der Maler Schlemmer, gesehen von E. L. Kirchner.



Welche von diesen drei

Zeichnungen ist wohl eine Dilettantenarbeit vom Insassen eines Irrenhauses? Staunen Sie: Die rechte obere! Die beiden anderen dagegen wurden einst als meisterliche Graphiken von Kokoschka bezeichnet.

Vienna in both 1907 and 1908, who subsequently tried to make a living by making water-colour copies of picture postcards and who now saw himself as an architect *manqué*, was deeply interested in art policy. The party architect and designer of important events such as the Nuremberg rallies, Albert Speer, was but one of several of Hitler's intimates to recall that art was often the subject of the Führer's table talk.

For that reason alone it is surprising that both the exhibitions of 1937 were the first of their kind (the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* was also the last), that it took so long for party policy to be fully formulated and even longer completely to take effect. Whilst it is true that the party set about controlling all cultural activity in Germany from the movement Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, and that in regions where the Nazis had gained parliamentary control before that – in the State of Thuringia for example – the process began even earlier, the fact remains that, even by 1936, by no means all activity in the visual arts had come fully under official scrutiny. Although there was a series of *Schandausstellungen* ('Exhibitions of Infamy'), which as early as 1933 put on show the 'decadent' parts of public collections in, among other places, Karlsruhe, Dessau, Mannheim and Chemnitz, museums in other cities such as Hamburg continued for at least two years to give places of honour to Expressionists and representatives of other modern schools. As late as 1937 inconsistencies persisted in official attitudes, and gratifyingly hilarious contradictions could still occur. Thus the sculptor Rudolf Belling, who worked concurrently in abstract and figurative modes, was represented in both the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* and the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* of the same year.

By the time of these exhibitions, however, control was almost total. Every independent artists' organisation had been absorbed by a union under direct state influence. Artists deemed 'degenerate' or, in a virtually synonymous phrase, 'culturally Bolshevik', had been expelled or persuaded to resign from national and regional academies, dismissed from teaching posts at art schools and universities, forbidden to exhibit and in some cases to acquire materials and therefore to work. Every museum official was invited to implement government policy or tender his resignation. That meant co-operating with the authorities sent by Berlin throughout the Reich to confiscate everything unacceptable. It also meant, in future, purchasing only what was officially approved. Art critics and historians were left in no doubt that they, too, were expected to follow the party line. In 1936 *Kunstkritik*, art criticism, was actually banned, replaced by *Kunstbe-trachtung*, reflection on art, a blander kind of writing in which all expression of opinion disappeared in favour of sympathetic description. Journalists were in any case told what to say about current exhibitions, which

artists to mention and in what terms, and of which artists the deaths and anniversaries could be marked. Artists out of favour could therefore be *totgeschwiegen* – killed by silence – while others were kept firmly in the public eye. Art historians learned that the more distant the period in which they specialised, the safer they were from interference. Those who insisted on thinking about the art of the previous hundred years were obliged to acknowledge a tradition in which major roles were played by painters such as Menzel, Leibl, Thoma and Hodler, and not even walk-on parts were given to the likes of Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat and Gauguin.

The *Entartete Kunstausstellung* of 1937 provided the last opportunity before 1945 for contemporary art unpalatable to the Government to be publicly viewed in Germany. It was the climax of a series of events during which such art was either removed from public collections, burned, appropriated by members of the Government (especially Hermann Goering) or auctioned off in Switzerland. On 30 June 1939 most of the contents of the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* was sold by auction at Lucerne.

The 'Degenerate Art Exhibition' proved enormously popular. When it closed in Munich on 30 November it had been seen by more than two million people (many more than saw the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung*), and more still saw it in a slightly different form when it travelled on to other cities in Germany and, after the Anschluss, in Vienna, too. Its striking popularity is usually explained as the result of the desire of so many people to see original and challenging things for the last time, before the banal celebrated its final victory. There may be something to this view; but another explanation is more likely: the general public enjoyed the spectacle of the humiliation of something which they did not understand, consequently feared and fervently hoped was a confidence trick. By no means did the general public alone relish what they believed to be the exposure of the modern art swindle. Some art critics, no longer embarrassed by their failure to grasp the point of something which had apparently struck most of their peers with the force of a spiritual revelation, also hugely enjoyed themselves.

Since it may be thought that there was something peculiarly German about this reaction to 'degenerate' art by professional critics, an account of a related event in England will prove instructive. In 1938 Herbert Read and others organised an exhibition of modern German art at the New Burlington Galleries in London as a propaganda exercise, as an answer given by a democratic nation to the 'Degenerate Art Exhibition'. At least one of those invited to exhibit, Oskar Kokoschka, then living in exile in Prague, feared that the effort would prove counter-productive, since most of the visitors to the exhibition would have little sympathy for what was shown.

Kokoschka's fears were justified: even usually enlightened critics expressed their hostility. One of them was Raymond Mortimer, who wrote in the *New Statesman and Nation* that the 'people who go to see the exhibition are only too likely to say: "if Hitler doesn't like these pictures, it's the best thing I've heard about Hitler."' Mortimer went on to describe the impression made on ordinary people as one of 'extraordinary ugliness'.¹

In Germany the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* had made the man in the street feel that the Government was on his side against the self-appointed experts, that the Government had ensured that in art, as in other matters, common sense had triumphed. Authorities more reliable than self-appointed art experts now told him that if he found something difficult to understand, contrary to his perception of things or otherwise offensive, it was necessarily devoid of quality. Abstraction was indeed nothing more than pattern-making; distortions of the human form or of any other aspect of nature were the product of a diseased mind. The popular success of Nazi art policy ensured the victory of banality.



The Nazi Government implemented all its cultural policies with singular energy; but its efforts to control artistic activity throughout the nation were hardly without precedent, nor was it the first government in history to claim the right to define the nature of art. Many of its attitudes and methods were anticipated by and may even have been borrowed from the Soviet Union, which during the 1920s reversed its liberal policy towards literature, music and the visual arts, attacked experimentation of every kind and declared Socialist Realism to be the only acceptable style.

The only significant difference between Soviet and Nazi art policies is that the Soviets prescribed as well as proscribed. In practice, however, as any comparison between Nazi and Soviet art will show (battle scene for battle scene, popular hero for popular hero, tractor for tractor, contented peasant for contented peasant), both the subject-matter, style and apparent purpose of the majority of paintings and sculptures are strikingly similar.

That it should be the Soviet Union which offers the closest parallel to the Third Reich in this respect is surprising. There was, after all, another Fascist state in Europe whose leader, Mussolini, had provided the Führer with one of his earliest role models. In cultural matters, however, Italy was considerably more liberal than its ally at the northern pole of the Axis. Although directly and enthusiastically involved in artistic affairs, Italy was less consistent and less thorough in its application of norms. Most

obviously it was less hostile to experimental styles and even encouraged two of them, the *scuola metafisica* ('the 'metaphysical' painting invented by Giorgio de Chirico), and Futurism. In spite of the fact that both styles had seen better days, and that Futurism was the invention of one of the pioneers of theoretical Fascism, F. T. Marinetti, both were unconventional enough. In Germany they were indeed execrated as violently as every other example of *Kunst-ismus* ('ism-art'), virtually a synonym for degeneracy. Occasionally this conflict of ideas caused diplomatic problems at a high level, as when a large exhibition of Italian art 'from 1800 to the present day', sponsored by the Italian Government, was staged in Berlin in December 1937. It included a small Futurist section which would not have looked out of place in the *Entartete Kunstausstellung*.

Inconsistencies in official attitudes to German and foreign art were numerous and inevitable (especially after the fall of France) and make the completeness of the control over cultural activities within Germany itself seem remarkable. Although it is difficult to be sure, it seems likely that Nazi art policy enjoyed widespread support. What is certainly true is that many of the arguments the Government employed in its effort to define the nature of the nation's culture were not new. Some of them were intellectually respectable and commonplace long before they were borrowed and frequently perverted by the theorists of National Socialism.

The most important of them concerned national cultural identity. Although the debate about an art that might be regarded as quintessentially 'German' began during the Romantic Revival (where it was given extra edge by the Nationalist Movement), the terms on which it was conducted became less rarified during the years following unification in 1871. To many Germans none of 'their' painting and sculpture seemed more than third-rate beside the achievement of the French. While the *Siegessäule* in Berlin proclaimed the nation's military superiority, by displaying the gilded cannons captured from the French at Sedan, the National Gallery was abjectly bowing the knee to the enemy by acquiring more art by French than German artists.

Kaiser Wilhelm II characteristically met the problem head-on: he not only publicly attacked all contemporary painting tainted by foreign influences as *Rinnsteinskunst* (literally, 'gutter art'), but in 1896 sacked the director of the Berlin National Gallery, Hugo von Tschudi, for buying too many French paintings. That event must have sprung unbidden to the minds of those museum officials dismissed by the Nazi Government some four decades later for a broadly similar reason. Appropriately enough, some of the paintings included in the Lucerne auction of 1939 had first entered Germany when acquired for Berlin by von Tschudi.

A broadside of 1911, the *Protest deutscher Künstler* ('A Protest by German Artists'), written by Karl Vinnen, an unsuccessful provincial painter, and signed by 120 other artists, asserted that too much attention was being paid not only to foreign but also to 'modern' and experimental art at the expense of native and conservative talent. The counter-argument was put by another publication (*Im Kampf um die Kunst* – 'Fighting for Art') by artists of the kind Vinnen had attacked. Significantly, several of the signatories to the former protest enjoyed some success after 1933, while almost all of the contributors to the latter found themselves in the 'degenerate' camp.

One prominent aspect of the long and continuing debate about national art and national culture was decidedly sinister. The attempt to define national characteristics in art became inextricably bound up with racial theories. Germans, it was argued in a series of books and articles dating back at least as far as the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were members of the Nordic race and were thus quite different from the Latin peoples with whom they shared the western part of Europe. This difference, evident in physical traits, emerged in art, literature and music. Climate, geography and genes ensured that the Nordic artist was concerned with issues fundamentally at variance with those pursued by his Latin counterpart.

Later tracts went beyond the notion of racial difference and even of Nordic superiority and claimed to discern connections between art and the mental and physical state of those who produced it: degenerates produced degenerate art. Possibly the most sensational of such publications was *Kunst und Rasse* ('Art and Race', 1928) by the architect and cultural activist Paul Schulze-Naumburg. Thirty-two of the 175 illustrations in Schulze's book compared the work of such artists as Modigliani, Schmidt-Rottluff, Kokoschka, Picasso and Nolde (later inevitably branded 'degenerate' to a man) with photographs of men and women suffering from encephalitis, elephantiasis or mongoloidism (Fig. 15). Clearly, such comparisons provided inspiration for the organisers of the *Entartete Kunstausstellung*.

There is yet another, more telling aspect to the artistic debate as it was conducted before the Nazi period. French art was not rejected by the Kaiser and other reactionary Germans simply because it was French. Indeed Wilhelm II did not feel strongly about *all* recent French art and may well have been an admirer of some of it, the work of Meissonier, for example. Most of what had been acquired by the museums and celebrated by the most vociferous critics was avant-garde. In other words it was (if good of its kind) original, critical of established conventions, and as a result largely

(facing 15) Two pages from *Art and Race*, contrasting portraits by Schmidt-Rottluff with photographs of people with physical abnormalities.



Abb. 129. Paralyse, 130. Mangelnde Zehntopie, 131. Fälligkeit der Anfertigung, 132. Mangelnde Zehntopie, 133. Mangelnde Zehntopie



Was hatte es aber für ein Volkleben zu sagen, wenn eine gewisse Größe sich künstlerisch so ausdrückte und ein weit größerer Teil es hinnehmte und wie jede andere Mode arbeitete?

Es ist für einen denkenden Menschen schwer, nicht nach der Ursache dieser Erscheinungen zu fragen, die sich aufbringlich genug innerhalb eines Volkes zeigen, das bisher als vorzüglich nordisch eingestuft



Abb. 126.



Abb. 125.

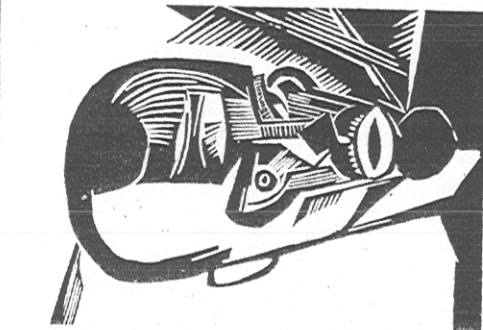


Abb. 127.



Abb. 128.

Die Abb. 125–128, 133–135, 139–141, 143–146 und 149–152 sind Ausschnitte aus Bildern von 1915–33, die besonders beachtliche Gestalten darstellen. Die ihnen gegenüberstehenden Abb. 129–132, 136–138, 142–144, 147–148 und 153

incomprehensible to the conventional mind. Avant-garde art could by its very nature speak only to a minority of open-minded, unprejudiced people. It could not satisfy the spiritual needs of most of the population who, through their taxes, were enabling the museums to pay for it.

In France, its country of origin, the avant-garde was fully established before the turn of the century. It almost destroyed the academic system by confronting it with an impermanent, anarchic pageant of styles and opinions which appeared and disappeared with bewildering speed. In Germany, by contrast, the avant-garde had scarcely begun to drive out academic forms of art by 1900, although the emergence of alternative exhibiting bodies in all the major German cities during the 1890s (the Secession Movement) marked the beginning of a growing commitment to experimentation, often under direct influence from France.

Not until the inter-war years, the period of the Weimar Republic, did the German avant-garde celebrate its victory. It suddenly became clear to foreign taste-makers that German art, architecture and design were making a major contribution to international Modernism, the avant-garde style in evidence everywhere from New York to Prague. This was of little comfort to the common man in Germany, who was as bemused as his counterpart abroad by Kandinsky's non-figurative paintings and the flat-roofed, concrete houses of the Bauhaus. What distinguished the German from his foreign counterpart, however, was the background against which he viewed the activities of the avant-garde. For many people there appeared to be eloquent affinities between the seeming irrationality of abstract art, or the excesses of Expressionism, and the political instability, economic crises and collapse of moral values during the Weimar Republic.

The Nazis exploited the prejudices of the common man with some sophistication. Presenting themselves as the saviours of the nation from the spirit of Weimar, they asserted that between 1919 and 1933 vast sums of money had been spent by a bankrupted exchequer on the acquisition of painting and sculpture by artists, mostly foreign, which only a few claimed to understand. The Nazis declared solidarity with the uncomprehending and war on those artists and dealers who had allegedly grown fat on the deception. Significantly, the prices of the exhibits at the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* were kept low so that ordinary people might afford modest collections of contemporary German art.

There were, of course, objections to the avant-garde, other than the claim that it embodied the spirit of Weimar. From the moment of its emergence in the France of the 1840s the avant-garde had been inextricably linked with radical politics. Many of the leading avant-garde painters, Courbet, Pissarro and Seurat among them, were active on the far left of the

political spectrum. The restless search for alternatives to convention by means of the subjects and styles of such artists' work encouraged the desire for continuous questioning and – what was worse – continuous change. Avant-garde art was revolutionary at several levels. Not only in Germany were conservative politicians afraid of it.

IV

In one important respect the German avant-garde proved to be different from most, if not all, of its foreign counterparts. For the debate in Germany about the nation's cultural identity, about vitality and degeneracy in art, was in part conducted by the avant-garde itself.

Several of the Expressionist painters who came to maturity around 1910 were determined simultaneously to destroy existing conventions and introduce thoroughly 'Germanic' or 'Nordic' qualities into their art. Drawing heavily on nineteenth-century romantic theory and on several of the ideas which had emerged during the more recent debate about the national cultural identity, they wanted to be original and obviously German, to be avant-garde without appearing to be indebted to the French.

The most telling example of such an artist is provided by the north German Emil Nolde, whose thinking reveals in extreme form the contradictions and confusions current at the time. In his search for racial characteristics Nolde was attracted not only to the Gothic, then believed by many Germans to be the quintessential 'Nordic' style, but also to a wide range of exotic, primitive art, in which he claimed to find the direct and authentic expression of race. In developing a new style capable of an equally direct expression of his own 'Nordic' soul, Nolde arrived at a combination of exaggerated colour and distorted forms, to which the closest parallels were, paradoxically, French. Yet another contradiction was Nolde's simultaneous admiration for the culture of primitive races and his crude racialism.

Nolde was by no means the only Expressionist to aim for a thoroughly German and thoroughly modern style around 1910. Most notably the artists of the *Brücke*, the Dresden group of which Nolde was briefly a member, sought to revive the medieval and in their view characteristically Germanic art of the woodcut; and they occasionally alluded in their painting to works by the great German masters of the past, such as Cranach. Nolde was nevertheless unusual because he, alone of the major Expressionist painters, joined the Nazi Party, in 1920 (the same year as Hitler), believing that its programme was the political equivalent of his artistic philosophy. He remained a fervent Nazi even after he was condemned by

the Government as 'degenerate' and forbidden not only to exhibit but also even to paint.

Nolde's theories, heavy with racialism and mysticism of the *Blut und Boden* variety, might suggest that there are links between Expressionism and Nazism. As David Midgley shows in Chapter 3, many of the left-wing intellectuals who sought refuge from the Third Reich in the Soviet Union argued that there were indeed such links: that the extreme subjectivity of Expressionism, the belief in the primacy of feeling and the scorn for logic and rationally, directly contributed to an atmosphere conducive to Fascism.

Appealing though such an argument is, it must be admitted that far more Expressionists were politically active on the left than on the right. Certainly true, however, is that many Nazis, some of them influential, believed that the kind of 'Nordic' Expressionism produced by Nolde and others was eminently qualified to become the new state art. One of them was no less a figure than Goebbels, who as late as 1934 argued that the Expressionist style should receive official blessing. Alois Schardt, the Nazi director of the Berlin National Gallery, also publicly stated that there were close links between the kind of figurative Expressionism represented by the work of Nolde and Kirchner and qualities discernible in the Germanic art of all periods. For a time Schardt continued to hang Expressionist paintings in the modern German section of the museum.

But, as the *Entartete Kunstausstellung* vividly illustrates, Expressionism did not achieve official status and was finally not even tolerated. Given Hitler's hostility to every form of contemporary art that was neither bland nor nugatory, it never could have been. Nevertheless in 1934 there was a major debate behind closed doors, in the course of which Goebbels was forced to concede defeat to the party theorist Rosenberg (who was supported by Hitler). At the party rally of 1934 Rosenberg made a speech in which the future of art in the new Germany was a major theme. He made it clear that the Government regarded every form of the avant-garde as un-German, socially evil and morally bankrupt. Party cultural policy was now more clearly formulated, and the authorities could begin more consistently to enforce it.

By 1937 the result was not only the most oppressive artistic climate ever known, but also a period in which in painting and sculpture the mediocre, the stale and clichéd were encouraged and nurtured. This much is clear, even though it is impossible to be objective about Nazi art, and any judgement of it is made doubly difficult because most of it remains hidden from view (very little has been exhibited or reproduced since 1945).

Perhaps at a future date it will be possible to take a more balanced view of the art produced in Nazi Germany, eventually to see it as unencumbered

by political issues as we see the work of Jacques-Louis David today. Perhaps the affinities between Nazi art, and contemporary styles in Germany and abroad, will then become as clear as the differences.

The years between the two world wars are marked everywhere by a growing reaction against the headlong experimentation in which the avant-garde indulged before 1914. After 1918 Picasso was but one of many painters to return wholeheartedly to figuration and even to a neo-classical style. The work of Otto Dix and George Grosz, however challenging its political content, also reflected the desire not only to produce convincing illusions of aspects of the real world once again, but also to retrench, to return to artistic traditions whose merit had been proved by time. Significantly, the Old Masters, despised by the avant-garde, once again served as models for both technique and subject-matter.

The art sponsored by the Nazi Government was also a reaction against the avant-garde and an attempt to revive a tradition which the avant-garde had suffocated. Unlike Picasso's neo-classicism or Grosz's realism, however, Nazi painting and sculpture were content to imitate without modifying their models.

Nazi art was frankly populist in intention, and it is doubtful whether any populist art of any period can be regarded as considerable. This view was advanced by Thomas Mann in *Doktor Faustus*, a novel published ten years after the two exhibitions in Munich so dramatically illustrated Nazi attitudes to the visual arts. The reflections on art and society in this novel provide an appropriate epitaph to the story of art in Nazi Germany:

Art is spirit and in no way whatsoever should the spirit feel beholden to society, to the community – in my view it must not feel so beholden for the sake of its own freedom and nobility. An art which 'goes to the people', meets the needs of the masses, of the little man, of the philistine, becomes weak and miserable [. . .] I am convinced that the spirit in its boldest, freest and least popular advances, researches and experiments will serve [. . .] not only the individual but, in the long run, even mankind.²

Notes to chapter 15

- 1 *New Statesman and Nation*, 16 July 1938.
- 2 *Doktor Faustus*, 1947, XXXI, p. 512.