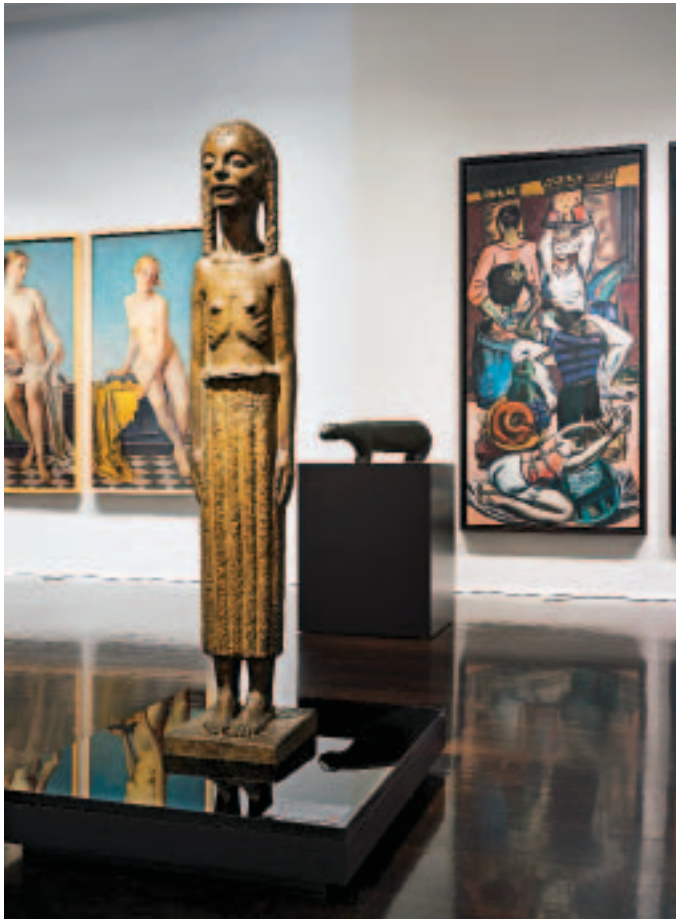


## THE ANTI-MODERNISTS

*Why the Third Reich targeted artists.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



You might not expect much drama from “Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Germany 1937,” a succinct historical show at the Neue Galerie. The subject—the propagandistic “Degenerate Art” exhibition, which presented modernist works for popular vilification—is familiar, and it ranks as scarcely a footnote in the annals of Third Reich infamy. But the nuanced treatment of the event, by the German curator Olaf Peters, shocks anew, even at a distance of seventy-seven years. Peters has done a lot with a little: only about twenty works that appeared in the show, along with others by the same artists. Apposite photographs and films accompany

the works. One room features empty frames that once held large paintings—probably destroyed—by the likes of Max Beckmann, Paul Klee, Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Oskar Kokoschka. The show decants an essence of Nazism’s malice and the mass hysteria on which it fed. Is the target only art? Art was no incidental matter for Adolf Hitler, whose designs on the world, keyed to the rightful dominance of a purified master race, were aesthetic at their twisted root.

The hate-fest of “Degenerate Art,” which travelled to eleven cities in Germany and Austria, commenced in Munich on July 19, 1937. On display, in the cramped quarters of an archeological mu-

seum, were some six hundred and fifty of the twenty thousand works that the Nazis eventually confiscated from German institutions and collections. Many were subsequently burned; others were sold abroad, for hard currency. Wall texts noted the prices that public museums had paid for the works with “the taxes of the German working people,” and derided the art as mentally and morally diseased or as a “revelation of the Jewish racial soul.” Only a handful of the artists were Jews, but that made scant difference to a regime that could detect Semitic contagion anywhere. Some months earlier, Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister, had announced a ban on art criticism, as “a legacy of the Jewish influence.”

“Degenerate Art” was a blockbuster, far outdrawing a show that had opened the day before, a short walk away, in a new edifice, dear to Hitler, called the House of German Art. “The Great German Art Exhibition” had been planned to demonstrate a triumphant new spirit in the nation’s high culture, but the preponderance of academic hackery in the work produced for it came as a rankling disappointment to Hitler, whose taste was blinkered but not blind. By official count, more than two million visitors thronged “Degenerate Art” during its four-month run in Munich. Little is recorded of what they thought, but the American critic A. I. Philpot remarked, in the *Boston Globe*, that “there are probably plenty of people—art lovers—in Boston who will side with Hitler in this particular purge.” Germany had no monopoly on philistinism.

“Degenerate Art” slandered every innovative style of the previous three decades—Hitler having dictated a starting date of 1910—but mainly, in an ironic emphasis, homegrown German Expressionism. Some leading Nazis had been enthusiasts for the movement—Goebbels considered it a fitly nationalist complement to the New Order, with parallels in German medieval, Renaissance, and folk art. He had his apartment in Berlin remodelled by the architect Albert Speer, who incorporated watercolors by the great Expressionist—and devoted Nazi—Emil Nolde. But Hitler idealized pre-Christian Greek and Roman art and countenanced no kind of painting more contemporary than nineteenth-century

*Works on view include, at rear, triptychs by Adolf Ziegler and Max Beckmann.*

Bavarian genre scenes. The Führer paid a visit to the apartment and his rage, at the sight of the paintings, snapped Goebbels into line. (Political fealty cut no ice with Hitler in matters of art.) Further motivated by a determination to outflank anti-modernist radicals in the Nazi hierarchy, such as the bumbling fanatic Alfred Rosenberg, Goebbels became the driving force behind “Degenerate Art.” He well understood the political utility of organized loathing; the Munich show included thirty-six pictures by Nolde, the most by any one artist.

What might the culture of the Reich have been if it had embraced Expressionism? That amounts to imagining Nazism without Hitler. The failure of his favored artists to fulfill his expectations might have taught him that greatness in art cannot be willed, but, of course, it didn’t. He just willed harder. The most celebrated German moderns either fled the country, like Beckmann and Klee, or retreated into internal exile, like Dix, who painted anodyne landscapes in rural obscurity. Nolde spent the war years working in watercolors, so as not to risk a telltale odor of oils in his studio, because he was officially forbidden to paint. In 1938, the most prominent originator of Expressionism, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, committed suicide, in Switzerland. The Bauhaus, which is featured in one room of the Neue Galerie, had been forced to disband, in 1933, despite a pledge of political neutrality from its director, Mies van der Rohe.

Photographs blown up to mural size serve as backdrops for some works in the new show. Two aerial views of Dresden,

before and after its devastation by Allied bombs, in February, 1945, dramatize the toll of war in a city that was both the home of the pioneering Expressionist cohort called Die Brücke (the Bridge) and an early site of anti-modernist “exhibitions of shame,” staged by Rosenberg’s Militant League for German Culture, which anticipated “Degenerate Art.” In a corridor hung with Nazi propaganda posters, a wall-spanning photograph of crowds lined up to attend “Degenerate Art” faces one of Jews arriving at Auschwitz. (This might seem heavy-handed, but its relevance is impossible to overstate.) The show climaxes with a comparison of “Great German Art” works and works that appeared, or might as well have, among the “degenerates.” Two triptychs are strikingly juxtaposed: a masterpiece by Beckmann, “The Departure” (1932–33), which escaped confiscation and was given a place of honor in the Museum of Modern Art during the war, and “The Four Elements” (1937), by Adolf Ziegler, who was the least bad aesthetically of the Nazi painters but one of the most vicious spokesmen among them.

The central panel of the Beckmann depicts a king in a boat at sea; in the side panels, enigmatic figures perform sadistic acts. In the Ziegler, which Hitler owned, four nude Aryan beauties repose on a long plinth and wield attributes of fire, water, earth, and air. They are kitschy enough, as confections of a trumped-up sensibility that Hitler had wishfully termed “Greco-Nordic,” but well done, in simmering harmonies of light-blue sky and delicately shadowed, effulgent flesh. The pleasure imparted by

“The Four Elements” is disturbing. In presenting the work, and other, lesser but not entirely miserable examples of “great German art,” Peters plainly means to disrupt complacent assumptions about a moment when people, if untouched by the terror, might still have condoned some aspect of the Reich. Further complicating matters, not all the “degenerate” artists were first-rate, or even very good, as witness a cartoonishly grotesque sculpture of a head, by Otto Freundlich, that provided the chief image in publicity materials for the Munich show.

The art historian Ruth Heftig, one of eleven essayists in the Neue Galerie’s compulsively readable catalogue, states a crowning irony: that the “stigmatization of modernism caused by the National Socialists is partly responsible for the current boom in modern art,” having “created a canon, so to speak, that had not existed previously.” The glamour of martyrdom came to halo modern artists with political virtues that few of them either sought or merited. This set the stage, in Cold War America, for the public acceptance of Abstract Expressionism as, for all its esoteric aesthetics, a potent symbol of liberal democracy, versus Communist dogmatism. In Germany, the reaction spurred a revival of Expressionism and fuelled a spirit of purgatorial atonement, which found focus in the career of the former Luftwaffe pilot Joseph Beuys and led to the global eminence of the painters Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer. Divorcing our thinking about modern culture from the residual consequences of “Degenerate Art” probably can’t be done. ♦

THE NEW YORKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT ©2014 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME XC, NO. 5, March 24, 2014. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 17 & 24, June 9 & 16, July 7 & 14, August 11 & 18, and December 22 & 29) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Elizabeth Hughes, vice-president and publisher; Beth Lusko, associate publisher advertising; James Guilfoyle, director of finance and business operations; Lynn Oberlander, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, chief executive officer; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president; John W. Bellando, chief operating officer & chief financial officer; Jill Bright, chief administrative officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001. Canada Post: return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail [subscriptions@newyorker.com](mailto:subscriptions@newyorker.com). Please give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable, you are ever dissatisfied with your subscription, let us know. You will receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. For advertising inquiries, please call Beth Lusko at (212) 286-4454. For submission guidelines, please refer to our Web site, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. For cover reprints, please call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail [covers@cartoonbank.com](mailto:covers@cartoonbank.com). For permissions and reprint requests, please call (212) 630-5656 or fax requests to (212) 630-5883. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker’s name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. Visit us online at [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit [www.condenet.com](http://www.condenet.com). Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684 or call (800) 825-2510.

THE NEW YORKER IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE NEW YORKER IN WRITING.

