

First, They Came for the Art

‘Degenerate Art,’ at Neue Galerie, Recalls Nazi Censorship

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 13, 2014

“Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937,” at the Neue Galerie, opens with a quietly devastating compare-and-contrast. The walls of the narrow hallway leading onto the first gallery are covered with facing photomurals.

The image in one dates from 1938. It shows the exterior of the Haus der Kunst (House of the Arts) in Berlin where the traveling antimodernist exhibition called “Entartete Kunst” — “Degenerate Art” — has opened. The line of visitors waiting to get in stretches down the street.

The photo on the opposite wall is from 1944. It shows Carpatho-Ukrainian Jews newly arrived at the railroad station at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They are densely crowded together along the length of a platform that runs far into the distance and out of sight.

The message is clear: The event in the first picture led or contributed to that in the second. The show itself is one of the few in an American museum in the past two decades to address, on a large scale, the Nazis’ selective demonizing of art, how that helped foment an atmosphere of permissible hatred and forged a link between aesthetics and human disaster.

The basic facts of the narrative are familiar. Among Hitler’s grand plans

upon coming to power as chancellor in 1933 was to purify German culture, to promote the Apollonian “classical” and eradicate the uncontrollably Dionysian “primitive,” a category that included, along with the mentally and physically deformed, avant-garde modernism, Bolshevism, and Jewish culture.

Hitler’s views on art were far from original; they had clear roots in 19th-century German sociology. Nor were they, at first, systematic. He was into big, divalike, Riefenstahlian gestures, but with no clear official philosophy. The problem was, of course, that while his speculative thinking was limited, his search-and-destroy powers were not.

One of his first moves as chancellor was to commission the building of a museum in Munich to showcase his version of an aesthetic ideal. He inaugurated it in 1937 with the first annual “Great German Art Exhibition,” which he more or less handpicked. Most of the art was locked into uplift-intensive academic styles of an earlier time. Even Hitler seemed disappointed with the results.

A day after the museum’s debut, a second, hastily assembled government-sponsored exhibition opened nearby. Titled “Entartete Kunst,” it was made up of work in vanguard modernist styles: Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Dada, abstraction. The whole thing was pitched as a freak show, meant to demonstrate the threat the new art posed on everything German. Jews were implicated in the attack, even though only six of the 112 artists were Jewish.

The first room of the Neue Galerie exhibition gives an instant sense of the contrasting aesthetics and complicit politics of the two Munich shows through a side-by-side hanging of two large triptych paintings: Adolf Ziegler’s “The Four Elements,” from 1937, and Max Beckmann’s “Departure,” done from 1932 to 1935.

In Ziegler’s painting, the subject is obvious: Four blond academic female nudes decorously display themselves along with traditional symbols. Beckmann’s Expressionist picture is all mystery: Scenes of human torture fill the side panels, while at the center a cluster of stylized, possibly allegorical figures stand, as if waiting to push off, in a small boat.

Hitler loved Ziegler’s art. He chose “The Four Elements” for the big Munich show, then hung it over the fireplace in his home. Working through his minister of propaganda, the wily Joseph Goebbels, he also gave Ziegler the go-ahead to do a purge of modernist art from state-owned museums, a campaign that produced the “Degenerate Art” show but continued well beyond it. Eventually, some

20,000 pieces — Beckmann's triptych among them — were confiscated, to be sold, hoarded or destroyed.

So the two triptychs broadly define the official view of good and bad (evil) art in the Nazi era. And they divide the Neue Galerie room into two corresponding zones. The "Four Elements" side is dominated by the life-size sculpture of a neo-Classical nude by Richard Scheibe, and two sculpted portrait heads of Ziegler by August Waterbeck, now forgotten. On the Beckmann side on the room is a small, violently twisting 1910 bronze Expressionist figure by Ernst Barlach titled "The Berserker," and a 1911 still life of African sculpture by Emil Nolde that was in the "Degenerate Art" show.

But nothing is simple; paradoxes abound. Scheibe, after an early brush with censorship, worked steadily throughout the Nazi era without ever joining the party. An approved sculptural style seems to have been enough. At the same time, the much-touted Ziegler, who put Hitler's aesthetic biases into catastrophic action, fell out of favor, was sent to Dachau, then finally allowed to retire.

Goebbels, who took over from Ziegler as degenerate-art prosecutor, started out as a big fan of modernism. There was even a moment early on when Expressionism was a candidate for becoming the official national art style. That ended when Hitler decided otherwise, and successful artists like Barlach and Nolde, whom Goebbels admired, fell into "degenerate" disgrace.

Nolde's story, too, has its twists. Because of his disgrace, he emerged from World War II as something of a hero, an artist who, forbidden by the Nazis to pursue a career, had painted small, brilliant watercolors in private — some are on view here — and kept a kind of creative resistance alive. But Nolde wasn't resistant to Nazism. He had always embraced it and spent the war years trying to get back into the party's good graces.

You'll find all these complex stories related in detail in the engrossing catalog edited by the show's curator, Olaf Peters, an art historian and Neue Galerie board member. But the exhibition itself works in very broad narrative strokes that gain impact through the astonishing work used to illustrate them.

A gallery devoted to art in Dresden takes us back a step in time, to the years just before and after World War I, when the city was home to a group of artists who called themselves Die Brücke, the Bridge. One of their goals was to translate great German art of the past — Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach — into the language of present. In the process, they virtually invented Expressionism.

In the 1920s, they had success; you get a sense of this in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's 1925-26 painted portrait of himself and three Brücke colleagues, Otto Mueller, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, looking nattily dressed and self-confidently blasé. But under the Nazis, they were pariahs. Kirchner's group portrait ended up in "Entartete Kunst" in 1937, as did all but one of the dozen Brücke paintings in the Dresden room. A year later, Kirchner, in exile in Switzerland, put a bullet through his head.

Harassment of Bauhaus artists began even earlier. In 1931, the National Socialist party, Hitler's party, forced the school out of Dessau. It reopened to improvised quarters in Berlin, but closed there two years later. The clean-lined, functionalist Bauhaus style wasn't "degenerate" exactly, but the school's international — read, foreign — outlook was nearly as threatening. In the end, cosmopolitanism is what saved it. Most Bauhaus members felt comfortable enough in the wider world to leave Germany behind, and did.

What they left was inconceivable destruction, to lives and art alike. You get some grip on numbers in the show's concluding gallery on the first floor, where a fat ledger book is on display filled with typed lists of "degenerate art" officially confiscated, mostly in 1937 and 1938, from German museums. Compiled in 1941-42 by the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda — Goebbels's department — the ledger is on loan from Victoria and Albert Gallery in London.

An X beside an entry indicates a work known to have been destroyed; empty frames hanging high on the wall in the Neue Galerie symbolize work still missing. But it's the art in the room called "The Fate of Works, the Fate of Artists" that your eyes go to, and particularly to a group of self-portraits.

There's Max Beckmann, in 1938, dressed in a red robe striped like a prison uniform and grimly eyeing a trumpet he holds in his hand as if wondering whether to sound it. And Kirchner, in 1937, sitting in a sun-flooded room with a little cat, staring straight forward, half his face left unfinished — or half obliterated. Context means a lot in the way you see art. You can't know how specifically personal these portraits are, how they connect to history, until you know that Beckmann was painting his in exile in Amsterdam the year after hundreds of his works had been impounded by the Nazis. Kirchner, painting in Switzerland, would be dead within a year.

Nor can you know that Oskar Kokoschka, who depicts himself in 1937 as a

lantern-jawed palooka, is a hero until you read the nose-thumbing solidarity-affirming title he gave to his likeness: “Self-Portrait as a Degenerate Artist.” You don’t even realize Felix Nussbaum has painted his until you look closely at his multigure 1944 picture “The Damned,” and recognize his face, familiar from other paintings by him, in a crowd.

Nussbaum, a German Jew, wasn’t in the 1937 “Entartete Art” show. Three years earlier, sensing menace in the air, he had left Germany for Belgium. There, in 1940, he was arrested as a “hostile alien” and put in a detention camp so nightmarish that he begged to be sent back to Germany. But he escaped en route and spent the next several years in hiding, on the move, living with friends here and there, and continuing to paint.

“The Damned” is a carefully composed, exquisitely painted horror story. A dozen gaunt, exhausted people crowd together in the foreground, shut in by high stone walls. A woman screams; another weeps; everyone else looks dazed except Nussbaum, who pulls his coat collar up and looks out of the picture furtively and appraisingly. A procession of skull-faced pallbearers carrying empty coffins enters the scene from behind.

In 1944, the year he finished the painting, Nussbaum was found hiding in an attic by Nazi soldiers, arrested and sent to Auschwitz where he was killed, age 39. The photomural of Auschwitz that opens the show was shot in the same year. Nussbaum could have — I’m guessing — arrived at the train station in the picture. He could have stood on that platform. And — because everything connects, always — he could have been a figure in a similarly horizon-piercing crowd.

“Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937” continues through June 30 at the Neue Galerie, 1048 Fifth Avenue, at 86th Street; (212) 628-6200, neuegalerie.org;

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