

# Susquehanna Art Museum

## *The Modernists: Witnesses to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

### “Degenerate Art: Hitler’s Revenge on the Modernists”

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In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the philosophical and artistic movement of Modernism arose, which transformed traditional ideals to conform to the rapidly changing world. Weimar Germany was one of the focal points of the period where individualism and spontaneity were promoted. Many individuals who grew up throughout this movement had difficulties connecting to it because the traditional ways of life were not only easier, but safer. One traditionalist that grew up during the Modernist period was Adolf Hitler. When aspirations of becoming a painter met with the disapproval of his father and he faced rejection from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Hitler viewed the growing Modernist movement with animosity. Once in power, Hitler took control of all aspects of art and culture to nationally mock the artwork of the Modernists in an act of vengeance to amend his shattered dreams of becoming a realist artist.

Adolf Hitler was born in 1889, in Braunau am Inn, Austria. While studying at the Gymnasium, Hitler’s father believed that the Realschule was better suited for his son because it would allow him to follow in his footsteps but obtain a higher position from his vocational education.<sup>1</sup> Hitler believed that his father’s decision to enroll him in the Realschule was to develop drawing skills which he believed he had an aptitude for. When his father realized that Hitler was using this schooling to become a professional painter, his father responded with, “A painter? An artist-painter?”<sup>2</sup> His father attempted to persuade young Hitler into a position in the government, but each attempt only pushed him in the opposite direction. Hitler knew that one day he would

become a painter.<sup>3</sup> At the age of 13 Hitler lost his father and two years later he also lost his mother. Lonely and impoverished, Hitler left for Vienna.

Hitler was determined to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. While his mother was dying, he visited the academy and convinced himself that he was destined to be accepted. Ultimately, he was declined because his entrance exam displayed that he was better qualified for drawing than painting.<sup>4</sup> He returned to Vienna determined to pass the entrance exam but failed once again which, he said, “struck me like a bolt from the skies.”<sup>5</sup> The Rector of the academy insisted that his drawings were more inclined towards the School of Architecture, but it required a Middle School Leaving Certificate which Hitler did not have.<sup>6</sup> Between the ages of 19 and 25, Hitler wandered the streets and sold watercolors of views of Vienna and Munich on postcards to get a morsel of food.<sup>7</sup> This is where we see a dramatic change in Hitler’s view on art and Modernism itself. With Vienna being the focal point of European Modernism, it can be assumed that Hitler was surrounded by this new and exciting movement. At the lowest point in his life he stated, “For many people, the name of Vienna signifies innocent jollity, a festive place for happy mortals. For me, alas, it is a living memory of the saddest period in my life. Even to-day the mention of that city arouses only gloomy thoughts in my mind.”<sup>8</sup> It can now be understood that Hitler wished to suppress the Modernists as a means of revenge, because while he was at his lowest, artists were excelling around him.

In Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, he clearly depicted his failure as an artist and his political intentions for Germany which reinforced sentiments of nationalism. Once in power in 1933, Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels as the chair of the Reich Chamber of Culture which authorized him to regulate all aspects of art.<sup>9</sup> Goebbels was also designated as the head of the Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda where he proclaimed that the Ministry of Propaganda was

part of the national defense establishment and was dedicated to the spiritual mobilization of the German people in defense of the Fatherland.<sup>10</sup> Goebbels was then set up to accomplish Hitler's goal of promoting the image of a healthy and strong country through realist art, which was the only artistic style Hitler appreciated because it was all he could produce. However, the Nazi party had to first denounce and eliminate the art of the Modernists.

Hitler described Modernist art as “degenerate” in *Mein Kampf* because he believed it was created by the Jews and the Bolsheviks who were an intellectual class that were, “physically degenerate, not through privation, but through education...they are neither capable of maintaining themselves nor of making their way in life.”<sup>11</sup> This image is one that Hitler did not want to promote and the quickly growing Modernists movement was a threat to him and his country. In 1933 Hitler ordered the Bauhaus, a world-renowned art school that was the intellectual center of the Modernists, to be closed. The party began confiscating the artwork they deemed degenerate and displayed it next to work they deemed to be “healthy, stable art” to provide a model as to what art should look like. Not only did this discredit the Modernist art, but also strengthened the preexisting prejudices against the Jews and Bolsheviks. There were many cities that held their own exhibitions from local collections. In Stuttgart they focused on socio-critical realism and in Karlsruhe they focused on German Impressionism. Although the exhibitions varied by city, the artwork was subject to public attack.<sup>12</sup> Until 1937 these exhibitions were organized individually but were later lost in the shadow of the national exhibition *Entartete Kunst*.

The *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition was displayed in Munich in 1937, the day after the opening of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition).

The Degenerate exhibition displayed the art of the Modernists on graffiti-covered walls and next to art produced by individuals in lunatic asylums.<sup>13</sup> Over 600 pieces of art were displayed from thirty-two collections which represented 120 artists and spanned across Impressionism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Constructivism, Bauhaus, and New Objectivity.<sup>14</sup> The art was displayed in narrow rooms in an overwhelming and confusing fashion which was meant to trigger emotions



Dadaism exhibit in the Entartete Kunst Exhibition in Munich. It displays the Dadaist art in front of graffiti covered walls which shows the propaganda tactic of overwhelming the viewer.

of repulsion and indignation in the viewer.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the Nazis were able to get to the minds of their supporters through their powerful propaganda, and over three million people visited the exhibition. However, there were some visitors who defended the art on display which resulted in protests that lead to arrests.<sup>16</sup> The exhibition then toured throughout different cities of Germany and Austria. Goebbels noted, “The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition is a huge success and a severe blow. It will also come to Berlin in the fall... This is how it must be done. Awaken the people’s interest by

means of great actions.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the following years the art travelled and was sold to private collectors outside of the Reich, gradually decreasing the number of pieces in the exhibition. <sup>18</sup> In 1941 the exhibition was returned to the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Eight paintings, one sculpture, and 32 graphic works remained from the original *Entartete Kunst* and 132 additional paintings were added to the collection. <sup>19</sup> Although Goebbels claimed that the exhibition was a great success, the fact that only seven percent of the original art work was returned shows that there were many collectors who found the art's true worth and perhaps rescued it from its inevitable peril in the hands of the Nazi party.

The *Entartete Kunst* was the culmination of Hitler's revenge on the Modernists who surrounded and rejected him while at his lowest point in life in Vienna. No other modern person has exercised the same degree of personal control over the visual culture of his nation as he did. What seemed as though the fate of the avant-garde was left in the hands of the Nazi regime, we still find some of the most renowned artists of German Modernism today such as Max Ernst, Hans Hartung, Frank Auerbach, and many more. The defining factor of the Modernists was their rejection of realism and their experimentation with new techniques to reflect their ever-changing and traumatic world. Susquehanna Art Museum's exhibition *The Modernists: Witnesses to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* allows us to remember, acknowledge, and appreciate this movement.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mien Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (New York: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Kasher, "The Art of Hitler," in *October 52* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Hitler, *Mien Kampf*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Lippman, "Art and Ideology in the Third Reich: The Protection of Cultural Property and the Humanitarian Law of War," in *Penn State International Law Review* 17, no. 1 (Carlisle: Penn State Law, 1998), 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Hitler, *Mien Kampf*, 244-245.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph Zuschlag, "An 'Educational Exhibit:' The Precursors of the Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues," in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 83.

<sup>13</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, s.v. "Degenerate Art."

<sup>14</sup> Zuschlag, "An 'Educational Exhibit.'" 87.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 95.