

# Art as nazi propaganda

War



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Having been an artist himself, Hitler understood the potential power of imagery in moving the masses. “ We shall discover and encourage the artists who are able to impress upon the State of the German people the cultural stamp of the Germanic race . . . in their origin and in the picture which they present, they are the expressions of the soul and the ideals of the community” (Hitler, Party Day speech, 1935, qtd. Nazi Approved Art).

It is true that, with every culture throughout history, art represents “ the ideals of the community,” but it is clear that during the Third Reich, these “ ideals” were controlled by the Nazi Party. Hitler transformed the role of the artist to promote Germany and glorify the nation and his own ideals. Artists who did not comply with Hitler’s ideals risked their life, and therefore, there is an absence of social realism in German art during this time. The artists of Nazi Germany commonly depicted beautiful pastoral scenes, the heroism of German soldiers, the “ volk” (common folk) as Aryans in peaceful settings, and the evils of the Jewish people.

These kinds of stereotypes were useful in art, in that they were extremely simplistic, and therefore easily interpreted by the masses. Even the uneducated, the people who couldn’t read, could view these kinds of paintings and sculptures and understand them, but more importantly, could be moved by them. In the early twentieth century, there were radical changes being made in the art world. Modern movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Expressionism were not easily understood by the masses. They were not universally appreciated, and in fact, seen as “ elitist” by many, or even “ degenerate” by others.

Max Nordau, a physician and social critic, wrote *Degeneration*, in which he attacks “degenerate” modern art. “Such a style of painting may be compared to the disconnected speech of a weak mind, who chatters according to the current of the association of ideas, wanders in his talk, and neither knows himself, what he wishes to arrive at, nor is able to make it clear to us” (Nordau 84). Nordau presents several case studies of artists and writers, his main point being that society is degenerating and that it is both partially caused by and reflected in modern art.

Despite being Jewish, and using anti-semitism as an example of degeneration, Nordau’s “scientific” attack against modern art, and the phrase “degenerate” was recycled by the German Nationalist Socialists in order to promote their own style of art as propaganda. It is clear that the artists of the Third Reich did not “wander” in their message, and knew precisely what they wanted to make clear to the public. Hitler expressed his disgust with modern “degenerate” art, “As for the degenerate artists, I forbid them to force their so-called experiences upon the public.

If they do see fields blue, they are deranged, and should go to an asylum. If they only pretend to see them blue, they are criminals, and should go to prison. I will purge the nation of them” (Hitler, qtd. Gardner 110). This is a perfect example of the way in which Hitler adjusted the intellectual level of his message in order to appeal to the masses. Yourman identifies one of the major propaganda techniques of the Nazi party as “name-calling.” “‘Name calling’ is a device to make us form a judgement without examining the evidence on which it should be based. Here, the propagandist appeals to our hate and fear” (Yourman 149).

Hitler calls modern artists deranged, degenerate, criminals. It seems that, during this time, modern art was not widely understood by the public, and it is for this reason that Hitler was easily able to persuade the masses into both fearing and hating this type of art, as well as accepting the more realistic and simplistic Nazi propaganda. In September of 1933, Reichskulturkammer (Reich Culture Chamber) was established. Within the chamber, subgroups were established for music, film, literature, and visual arts, consisting of racially pure artists who would promote the Third Reich.

In 1937, the Haus der Kunst (“House of Art”) was erected by the Third Reich, in order to showcase the finest German art approved by the Third Reich. It was to hold two annual juried art shows, called “The Great German Art Exhibition” and “The German Architecture and Crafts Exhibition.” July 16th was declared the “Day of German Art,” an annual holiday to coincide with the exhibitions (Kasher 53). At the opening of the Haus der Kunst, Hitler gave a speech in which he declared, “...the artist does not produce for the artist, he produces for the people, just as everybody else does! And we are going to take care that it will be the people who from now on will again be called upon as judges over its art.... For an art that cannot count on the most joyful and most heartfelt assent of the healthy, broad masses of the people, but relies on small, partly interested, partly disingenuous cliques, is intolerable” (Hitler, qtd. Werckmeister 337). Again, Hitler was appealing to the masses by portraying Nazi propaganda as the art of the people. He convinces them that they are the true judges of art, instead of the “elitist” modern artists. The Reich Culture Chamber held a Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich at the same time as The Great German Art Exhibition.

After seizing about 17, 000 works of art from German museums, they displayed about 600 of them in their famous in the exhibition. “ Exhibition organizers surrounded the paintings and sculpture with mocking graffiti and quotations from Hitler's speeches, designed to inflame public opinion against this “ decadent” avant-garde art. Ironically, the exhibition attracted five times as many visitors (36, 000 on one Sunday alone) as the equally large “ Great German Art Exhibition” of Nazi-approved art that opened in Munich at the same time” (Philadelphia Museum of Art).

Arno Breker was “ the official state sculptor” of the Third Reich. He had studied sculpture in Paris and Berlin, and he was discovered by the Nazi Party, when his sculpture Decathlete came in second in the sculpture competition for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. After being appointed by Hitler as official state sculptor, he was given a studio and assistants. The majority of Breker’s works consist of muscular male nudes that were meant to symbolize a nation young, natural, healthy, and moral...” (Kasher 10). One of Breker’s most famous works is Die Partei, a statue meant to represent the spirit of the Nazi party.

Heinrich Hoffman was considered the leading Nazi photographer. He was a friend of Hitler’s and he documented the rise of the Nazi party. He was eventually appointed by Hitler as a national photojournalist, with the “ exclusive right to issue photographs of Hitler” (Kasher 17). He ran his own business, hired other photographers, published several photobooks glorifying the Nazi party, and distributed photographs to the press, which did the same. One of the most successful forms of Nazi propaganda, however, seemed to be the Nazi Party posers, which exhibited “ volkisch” thought,

appealing to the “ common people. Hitler was shown in posters, as somewhat of a mystical figure, guiding the destiny of the people of Germany. “ The essentially negative anti-parliamentarianism of Nazi propaganda led to the projection of the 'Führer-myth', which depicted Hitler as both charismatic superman and man of the people” (Welch). Many paintings and posters portrayed Hitler in the 'renaissance pose', with one knee up, with the slogan “ Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer” (“ One People, One Nation, One Leader”).

Beginning in the late 1930s, the tone of Nazi propaganda reflected the increasingly radical view of anti-semitism. “ The Jewish stereotypes shown in such propaganda served to reinforce anxieties about modern developments in political and economic life, without bothering to question the reality of the Jewish role in German society” (Welch). The transition from the popularity of avant-garde visual arts in Germany to the art of the Third Reich, is somewhat symbolic of the entire manner in which Hitler gained control over Germany.

His words from Mein Kampf foreshadow this, “ The greater the mass it is intended to reach, the lower its purely intellectual level will have to be” (Hitler, qtd. Asheville 464). Hitler understood the power of imagery in persuading the German people, especially the uneducated. The uneducated could understand the simplistic style and subject matter of the art of the Third Reich. The Nazi Party played off of the fears of the German people, which was why the demoralization of modern art and the glorification of the Nazi Party was so successful in Nazi Germany.

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