

Art in Nazi Germany

This activity sheet is meant to show what Martin Bloch and other German artists in exile were escaping from. Read through the sheet and then think about the questions at the end. These are supposed to be part of a discussion in the classroom.

Under the rule of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, art became an important tool, not just as propaganda, but as a way of creating a new German people. For Hitler art was linked to health, hard work, family life and racial purity. Art forms that did not support these ideas were viewed as 'degenerate'. This was especially true of the Expressionist and Surrealist movements.

In 1937 German museums and art galleries were stripped of any works of art that were seen as 'degenerate'. 650 of them were shown at a special exhibition in Munich called *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). Many of the artists shown at this exhibition are now seen as some of the greatest artists of the last century. They included Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.



'Degenerate Art' exhibition poster



House of German Art

At the same time the House of German Art was opened in Munich. This held an annual show of works of art that met with the approval of the Nazi authorities.

The quotes below are meant to show what the Nazis believed about the role of art.

From the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition catalogue

What the "Degenerate Art" exhibition means to do

It means to appeal to the sound judgement of the people and thus to put an end to the drivel and the claptrap of all those literary cliques and hangers-on, many of whom would still try to deny that we ever had such a thing as artistic degeneracy.

It does and must mean to prevent the jabbering cliques from that murky past from foisting any such men on the new state and on its forward-thinking people as "the natural standard-bearers of an art of the Third Reich"



Hitler at the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition

Quotes from Adolf Hitler at the opening of the House of German Art

Until National Socialism came to power, there existed in Germany a so-called modern art, which is to say that, almost by the nature of the word, there was something new almost every year. National Socialist Germany, however, means to have a German art once again, and this, like all the creative values of a people, must and will be an eternal art.

Art that cannot rely on the joyous, heartfelt assent of the broad and healthy mass of the people, but depends on tiny cliques that are self-interested and blasé by turns, is intolerable. It seeks to confuse the sound instinct of the people instead of gladly confirming it



**Farm Family
(Adolph Wissel) (1939)**

“Works of art” that are not capable of being understood in themselves but need some pretentious instruction book to justify their existence...will never find their way to the German people



**The Guard
(Arno Brecker)**

It is of no concern to me whether or not these amateur artists fall to clucking over each other's eggs and giving each other testimonials! For the artist does not work for the artist, but like everyone else he works for the people! And we shall take good care that from now on the people will be the judges of his art



**Water Sports
(Albert Janesh) (1936)**

Discussion Points

Now that you have read through the document you can discuss the following points.

- What did the Nazis believe artists were supposed to do (and not do)?
- “the artist does not work for the artist, but like everyone else he works for the people!” What do you think of this point of view?
- “Works of art” that are not capable of being understood in themselves but need some pretentious instruction book to justify their existence...will never find their way to the German people” Do you think that a work of art needs an “instruction book”? If it does, then does that make it a better work of art?
- Are “the people” the best judges of what is and is not good art? If not, then who is the best judge?