

The Effects of the Nazi Political Movement on German Visual Arts

"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.



Abstract:

In European history, one often hears of the tragedies and violations against humanity caused by the Nazi Party both before and during the Second World War. The Nazi political movement was without a doubt, one of the most dramatic developments of the 20th century. Any exposure of ideas that were not promoted by the Party was denied. Visual arts naturally fell under this category of self-expression, as one of the most powerful types of artistic expression in society.

In this essay, questions will be raised as to what effect this drastic political movement had on the German art at the time. Essentially, art was one of the most successful ways of increasing support for Hitler. Artistic expression simply became part of the Nationalist social political tactics. The art of the Third Reich helped to shape the German people's attitudes by having both discrete and indiscrete political messages, with stereotyped, idealized images. The Nazi regime influenced works of art, destroying some of the best work and using the qualities that art stands for to develop a form of 'brainwashing' art that we call propaganda.

"Art had to be simplified in order to communicate at the level of the lowest common denominator" –George Orwell, *1984*

INTRODUCTION:

The immense effect that Nazism had on German visual art will be examined in this essay. Prime examples of Nazi-approved art will be displayed, and the downfall of one of the most revolutionary schools will be discussed. Instead of giving historical insight explaining *why* the visual art in Germany was influenced and completely changed, some of the direct visual results of this drastic movement of art will be revealed. In this essay, I wish to discuss the movement of art in Germany, at its most controlled state ever, the Nazi era.

One main question will be raised, which is to what extent did Nazism affect visual art in Germany in terms of paintings? Evidence of the Nazi Party's racial views and the main values of family and hard work will be shown, conveying the ideology's flaws of unrealistic aims. Another interesting question is where German art would be today if the modern art development had not been delayed for many decades?

One could almost say that the Nazi controlled Germany of the 1930s and early 40s produced nothing of true artistic value. Neither colour, form, shape, texture, nor style was allowed to represent an artist's genuine state of mind or viewpoints if they did not go hand in hand with the national socialist party's codes of conduct. All elements of visual art were simply manipulated to support the Hitler's philosophies, the founder of Nazism. Therefore, the only tolerated art during this time of power seizure was heroic, propagandistic art. The result of this political ideology was thus the creation of a contrast of good and evil, a clear distinction between the enemy and what was accepted by the new regime. In the 'new' art of Germany, *Aryan* strength was shown as superior, above all other excluded minorities. A common theme of promoting the *Aryan* race can be seen in every painting approved by the Nazis.



This painting¹, by Adolph Wissel, a Nazi, can be labelled and categorized as a Nazi folk art piece. There are many ideas connected to the main theme of the strength of the Aryan race. For example, living the natural and healthy countryside life, in peace, from generation to generation.

The painting purposely includes all age groups, representing an entire family. A second concept in the painting is the idea of human power used to work the land. From the background, one can assume that the setting is somewhere rural with agriculture as the main source of income for the household. Notice the appealing, peaceful sky and the healthy red cheeks of both the young and old people. Even though their facial expressions show little evidence of an idealistic lifestyle, it is important to remember that the painting had to have a serious, unsuspecting tone. The individuals most likely to be influenced by this 'simple life' art would be the urban Germans. The city populations were in the heart of the political commotion and so therefore more easily saw this life as idealistic. In conclusion, the painting urban majority was able to further idealize the rural standard of living promoted by Nazism.

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This genre of Nazi supporting artists were in actual fact sending out a message to, more specifically, the working class, basically making them hear what they wanted, that they were just as worthy as any other high society intellectual. Again, this convenient targeting of the working class majority furthermore served as propaganda. This painting is almost a visual tool, used for connecting the ideals of health, family, motherhood, and so forth, with an agricultural standard of living model.²

The truth is, all approaching 'Nazi' art served as both propaganda directed towards the poor or working class, and at the same time, an encouragement for the general accordance that the Nazis were accepted in the rural areas.



There are two distinct types of Social Nationalistic paintings. One type is the obvious, superficial poster-like piece with swastikas and strong, politically inspired colours. The other type, less obvious and more philosophical, sub-consciously conveys a message supporting the main Nazi-focused themes. The previous page shows two good examples³ of these two techniques. As mentioned earlier, there are many ideas and images that can all be traced back to the common theme of Aryan strength. When looking at the water sports painting, one can make out an atmosphere of athletic competence. It is particularly effective in conveying a sense of motion, a subconscious feeling of progress towards an idyllic destination. Even though the style of this painting is not particularly political, the themes of health, collective action, athletic strength, and competition are clearly put forward to spread the views of Nazi German.



This painting⁴, by Arthur Kampf, is of 1933 Nazi seizure of power on 30th January. It shows the procession of a huge torch being lit. This piece serves as a memory of a historical event. It displays a dominance of law and order, soldiers are standing armed, in single file, and the public is saluting them in praise and acceptance.

The light of the big torch can be seen as the main focus point as it is placed in the center of the painting. Perhaps it represents a brighter future as light often symbolizes optimism. Since it was painted in 1938, and the procession was held in Berlin in 1933, it must be glorifying the beginning of a new Germany in contrast to the Great Depression of the late 1920's.

³ By Hubert Lanzinger

Before understanding the effects of the political influence on German art, it is important to have some knowledge of the movements and direction of the existing art before Hitler's time. German art was flourishing like never before during the Weimar Republic years. Some background information on 'pre-dictatorship' German art is therefore necessary in order to place the art movement in context.

In the beginning of the 20th century, an art known as expressionism was formed, deriving from the Berlin secession, led by Max Lieberman. Expressionism can be defined as art that represents a distorted reality to convey an inner vision. An expressionist does not imitate his or her surroundings but more or less transforms them.

The expressionist movement came in three different waves:

The 1905 Brücke, including artists like E.L. Kirchner and Emil Nolde, The 1911 Blaue Reiter, attracting more foreign artists such as Lyonel Feinginger, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and finally in the 1920's came Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, as part of the realism called the 'new objectivity'⁵

A lot of these inspirational artists taught at the Bauhaus, an art school that became the "breeding place of functionalism"⁶. The Bauhaus is one exquisite example the development of German art brought to a halt, due to the new government.

The Bauhaus was a revolutionary school of architecture and design, founded by Walter Gropius. It was established in Weimar in 1919, at a moment of political unrest and economic chaos. "Philosophically, the school was built on the idea that design did not merely reflect society, it could actually help to improve it."⁶ Experimentation was compulsory, in order to reach innovative goal of integrating artistic beauty with practical usefulness.

⁴ *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*

⁵ <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/ent/A0858381.html>

⁶ www.infoplease.com

The Bauhaus had a new way of teaching where functional craftsmanship in every field was used to not only make a social comment as art does, but was also practiced in an attempt to solve industrial problems of mechanical mass production. Different household appliances would be created, keeping in mind all the factors of production such as the price or material, so the Bauhaus had a style of its own. To sum up, this style can be defined as an economical perspective of method, a severe geometry of form, and design that took into account the nature of the materials employed.

The objects produced at the Bauhaus are still used as inspiration for designers today. One could almost say that the Bauhaus, which means ‘building house’, helped shape the world of future design and art pedagogy. The entire Bauhaus approach to art education has continued to influence teaching methods all around the globe. Oskar Schlemmer, a teacher there said, “four years of the Bauhaus reflect not only a period of art history, but a history of the times, too, because the disintegration of a nation and of an era is also reflected in it”⁷. Schlemmer had understood that the Bauhaus would still live on, as no matter how much art is suppressed, the philosophy behind can never be forgotten.

The school created amazing new ideas, it is difficult to imagine the progress that could have been made if it had not been closed down by the new Nazi Government in 1933. These orders, were in fact the first types of evidence of Hitler’s cultural policy. His aim was to eradicate all visual ‘decadent’ and ‘Bolshevistic’ art in Germany.

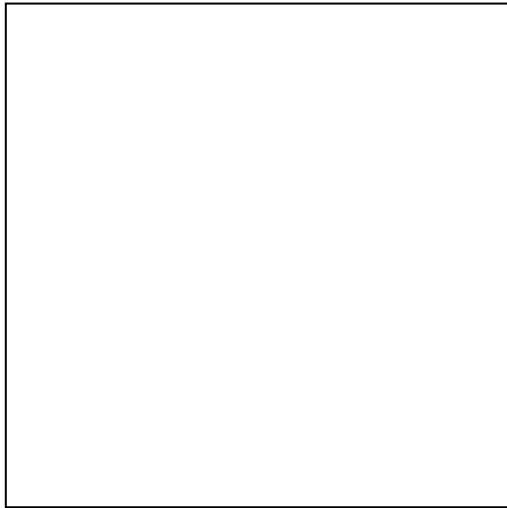
Unfortunately, the freedoms of the school’s concepts were only doomed to create severe opposition from right-wing officials. The students already had a reputation for being radical, probably originating from the school’s encouragement of individuality and originality.

After many attempts to restart the Bauhaus in other areas of Germany, when the nationalists won the regional elections in 1932, the school was finally removed

⁷ written by Oskar Schlemmer, in 1923

completely. The artists and architects therefore brought the concepts of the Bauhaus with them when they fled to more art friendly countries like the United States. On the contrary, because of the Nazi hostility towards the Bauhaus, by 1933, it had developed a reputation throughout Europe. This is the reason why the former students received recognition in the western world, so fast. Ironically, the struggles during the Nazi era served to be worthwhile, the 'New Bauhaus' founded by Moholy-Nagy in Chicago in 1937 is just one visual example of its successful afterlife.

Below is one of Moholy-Nagy's paintings⁸. For 1923, this piece was clearly 'ahead of its time'. Even someone with no knowledge of art can see that it is the exact, visual opposite of any art permitted by the Nazi cultural policy.



⁸ Oil on canvas (95.8×78cm)

The title of the painting ⁹ below is "The Führer Speaks". The family, from grandparents to small children, is gathered around the "*Volksempfänger*" (a cheap radio receiver), listening to Hitler speak. His picture is even up on the wall, as if he was a man of religious importance. This style can be found in most religious paintings, as if the painter was trying to imitate the worshipping of a religious symbol. Another person is reading a newspaper. Therefore, all forms of propaganda are revealed in this painting; visual image, audible, and through the last media, the press. Not only does this painting show the admiration Hitler to the extent of fixation, it also shows the efficiency of the Party's indoctrination. However, the religious parallels are quite small-minded and superficial. The idea of supporting Hitler is straightforward and very one-sided, like all heroic art pieces.



⁹ by Paul Padua, 1939



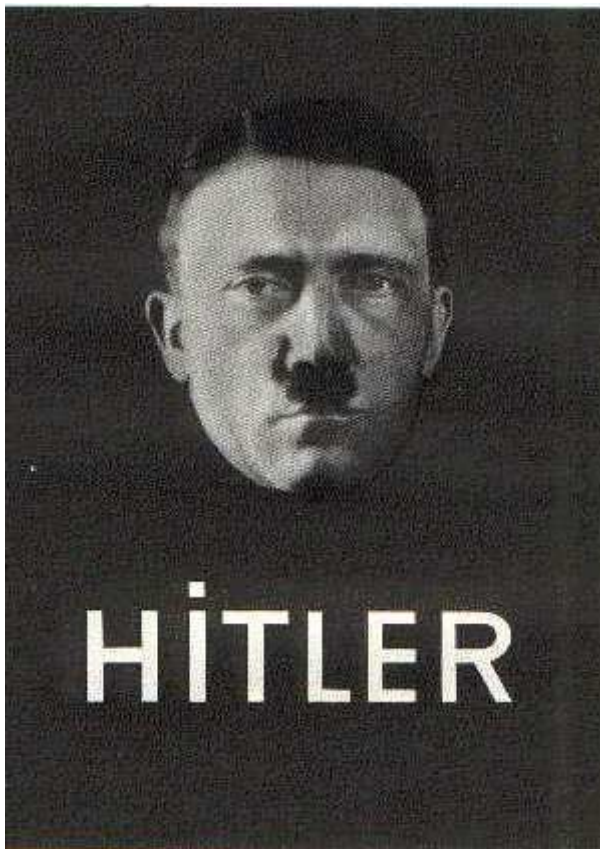
The Nazis viewed this as one of their best posters. It too is by Mjölner. The caption translates: "National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation." Goebbels claimed that Mjölner perfected the art of drawing the Nazi Storm Trooper.



This poster is from the September 1930 Reichstag election, in which the Nazis made their electoral breakthrough. the caption: "The people rise! They vote List 9". Courtesy of Dr. Robert D. Brooks



From the July 1932 Reichstag election. The text translates as: "We women vote for List 2: National Socialists."



This interesting poster appeared in 1932. The usual approach with posters is to use color to make them stand out. This one stands out because of Hitler's disembodied face floating on a black background.



This is another November 1932 poster: "Hitler Builds." Courtesy of Dr. Robert D. Brooks.

Conclusion:

One perspective is that all 'Nazi' art can be looked upon as simple expressions of political motivation, rather than the work of skillful painters. However the aesthetic effort put into any piece of art should be appreciated and not be disregarded purely because of the political opinions it represents. The concept of art is hard to define, for example, sixty years ago; statues of Hitler were considered art in Berlin. Now, any public display of a Nazi symbol is illegal.

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