



## “Degenerate” art

Shombit Sengupta  
Nov 10th, 2013

Shock waves rippled across Europe last week when 1500 paintings the Nazis had plundered in 1930s-40s were discovered in Munich. This haul, valued at well over a billion Euros, has priceless works of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix and Marc Chagall among others.

Adolf Hitler’s obsession with attaining Aryan purity for Germany included cleansing culture and art. So the work of modern artists was denigrated as “degenerate art (*Entartete Kunst*).” Very systematically such artworks were stolen from museums, confiscated from Jewish art collectors, and sent to Nazi headquarters ostensibly for destruction. Last June I’d visited Rose Vallard’s home (<http://www.financialexpress.com/news/the-woman-who-saved-french-art/1132517/0>), and written about how this brave Frenchwoman tried to prevent such theft.

Why Hitler was imposing his taste in art becomes understandable when you know that he failed to become a painter. Suppose he’d been successful in his primary ambition to be an artist, can you imagine how world history would have panned out? Because he did not draw the human form, he twice failed the

entrance test for the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 1907 and 1908. Very few of his hundreds of paintings on deserted places, buildings, and farmhouses were sold, and ironically mostly to Jews before World War I. The Americans carried his paintings away as war spoils, but has never exhibited them. “I am an artist and not a politician. Once the Polish question is settled, I want to end my life as an artist,” Hitler is quoted to have told British ambassador Neville Henderson before World War II.

Seemingly, to take revenge on the evolving world of abstract and modern art that dismissed his realistic landscapes, Hitler put up two art exhibitions in Munich in 1937. The Great German Art Exhibition had works Hitler approved of, like blonde nudes, idealised soldiers, landscapes. He coined the other as Degenerate Art Exhibition to ridicule modern, abstract, non-representational art. He wanted to give “ordinary, decent” Germans the chance to mock debased, non-Aryan, Jew and Bolshevik avant garde culture. Encouraging viewers to see this as an evil anti-German people plot, he said, “Works of art which cannot be understood in themselves but need some pretentious instruction book to justify their existence will never again find their way to the German people.”

The “degenerate” art was exhibited in different rooms by category: blasphemous art, art by Jewish or communist artists, art that criticised German soldiers, art that offended German women’s honour, the insanity room of abstract

paintings. Written in the exhibition handbook was, "In the paintings and drawings of this chamber of horrors there is no telling what was in the sick brains of those who wielded the brush or the pencil." To get the message across, Nazis hired actors to mingle with the crowds and criticise the exhibits which were deliberately hung crookedly and had negative graffiti scribbled around them. This Exhibition eventually attracted over a million visitors, three times more than the officially sanctioned one. It also created history's greatest artistic exodus, artists and Jews fled to neighbouring countries, Britain and America.

Perhaps a part of this "degenerate" art is now creating "essentially a modern-day story of pirate treasure," says *The Washington Post*. An 80-year old German, Cornelius Gurlitt, son of a Nazi collaborator art dealer, was enroute to Switzerland in 2010 when in a routine customs check alerted authorities to probe further. Focus magazine leaked the story that as he had no job, but a huge bank balance led to a raid of his residence in 2011. That's where a fortune of art was found, some dating to the 16th century. In his dirty apartment, shockingly cooked food was strewn amidst the paintings, some framed, others unframed. Gurlitt had inherited them but apparently was unaware of the art's origins, although he'd sell a painting whenever he needed money.

Families of former owners of Nazi-looted artworks continue to campaign for the return of such paintings and sculptures. Prominent among them is wealthy heiress Anne Sinclair, granddaughter of Paul Rosenberg, among the world's most influential art dealers who represented Picasso, Georges Braque, Marie Laurencin, Max Weber and Matisse among several European and American artists. Miss Sinclair, now news editor at *Huffington Post* French edition, had become famous for her scathing TV interviews where she met and

married Dominique Strauss-Kahn, disgraced ex-IMF President. She is particularly in search of *Portrait of a Lady* by Matisse, but whether that's in this collection is still not clear.

The Research Centre for Degenerate Art now has the responsibility of finding the entire list of pieces and artists. People are eagerly awaiting that, but it may be complicated as several owners have perhaps sold the paintings under duress. Art scholars and the public are questioning why the German Government has kept this find under wraps for over 2 years. Anne Webber of London-based Commission for Looted Art in Europe is asking for transparency, "Germany was a signatory to the Washington Principles in 1998 and 1999, along with 44 other countries, making a commitment to identifying the looted works in their collections and publishing the results. You have to wonder what is behind the extreme reluctance to provide information." Meanwhile, since Gurlitt's detention for tax evasion, but before his art collection was seized, he sold Max Beckmann's *The Lion Tamer* through a dealer for €840,000.

According to Focus, international warrants are out for at least 200 prized paintings. Perhaps Germany was silent about the 1500 paintings because of diplomatic and legal complications that would stem from this ill-gotten "degenerate" art. What it all definitively proves is that art's timeless command can totally engulf even a dictator like Hitler who'd designed most horrific 3rd Reich programs like "The Final Solution" to obliterate Jews to achieve Aryan supremacy. Fortunately the Axis Powers could not win World War II, so what Hitler pilloried as "degenerate" art can be enjoyed fearlessly by everyone today.

**—Shombit Sengupta is an international Creative Business Strategy consultant to top managements.**

**Reach him at [www.shiningconsulting.com](http://www.shiningconsulting.com)** ■