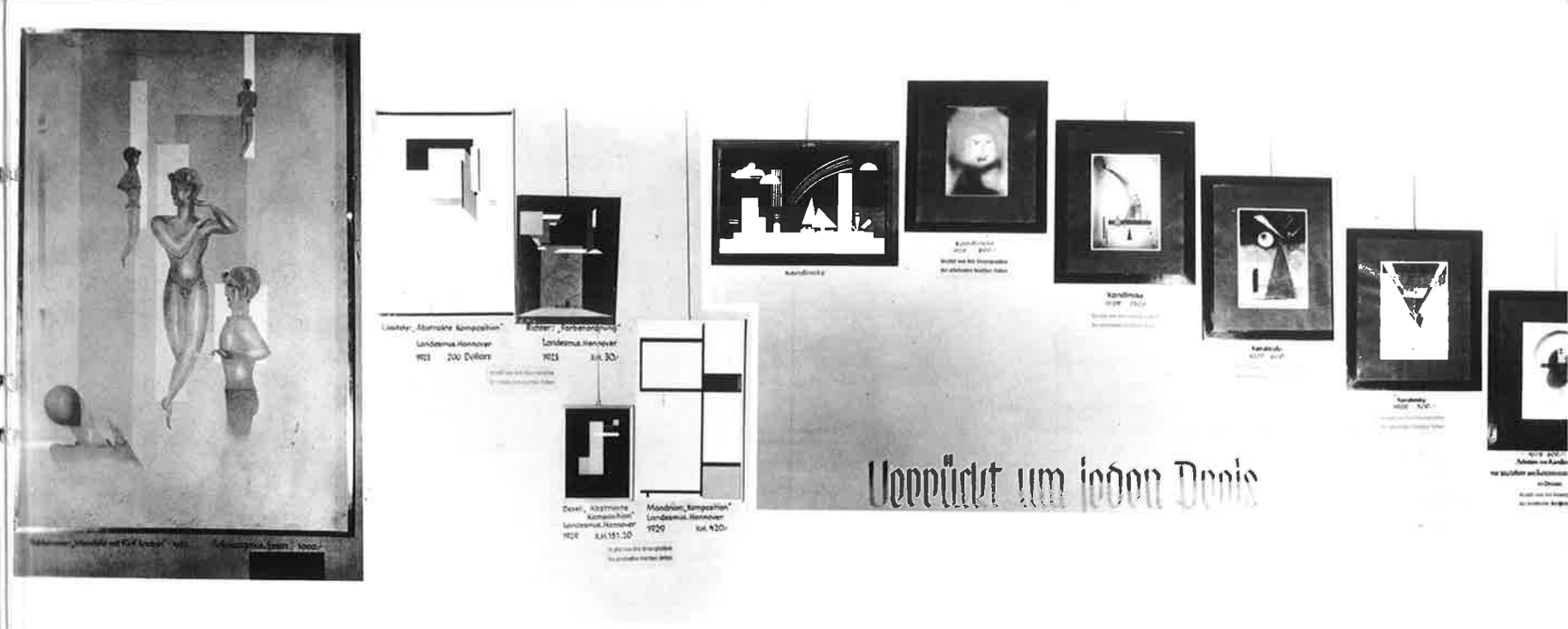

"Degenerate Art"

The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany

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with contributions by

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Title page: Section of the north wall of Room 5.

Right: View of Room 3; the sculptures are Eugen Hoffmann's *Adam und Eva* (Adam and Eve), at left, and Karel Niestrath's *Die Hungrige* (The starving woman).

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GEORGE L. MOSSE

Beauty without Sensuality

The Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*

The National Socialist standards for art were based upon the idealized figures and sentimental landscapes that had informed nineteenth-century popular taste and upon the neoclassical themes that were Adolf Hitler's favorites. National Socialism annexed neoromantic and neoclassical art, defining it as racially pure, an art that could easily be understood and whose depictions of men and women exemplified the Germanic race. This was the official art that dominated the annual *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German art exhibition) in Munich, beginning in 1937, for which the paintings and sculptures were often selected by Hitler himself.

There was deeper purpose to the acceptance of such art; it symbolized a certain standard of beauty that might serve to cement the unity of the nation by projecting a moral standard to which everyone should aspire. Respectability was to inform personal and public morality, which true art must support. The men and women in Nazi painting and sculpture thus embodied the proper morality and sexual behavior. Beauty without sensuality was demanded of artists and sculptors, a beauty that had to reflect the generally accepted moral standards that the Nazis championed as their own. For it was the strength and appeal of National Socialism that it did not invent anything new in its effort at self-representation but simply appropriated long-standing popular tradition and taste.

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition was staged in 1937 as a foil to the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. Painting and sculpture that supposedly reflected life in the Weimar Republic (1919–33) were displayed as concrete evidence that the Nazis had saved German society from Weimar's onslaught upon all the moral values people held dear: marriage, the family, chastity, and a steady, harmonious life. Weimar culture was "Bolshevist" culture, manipulated by the Jews, as the guide to the exhibition and the inscriptions on the gallery walls stated repeatedly. The destruction of respectability and the destruction of society and the nation were linked.

The exhibition must not be seen simply as Nazi propaganda, for it played upon basic moral attitudes that inform all modern societies. The concept of respectability has lasted, after all; even today art is condemned if it transgresses the normative morality in too shocking a fashion. That *Entartete Kunst* exists in a continuum is demonstrated by the controversy in 1989 over Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs, which were thought to offend against public decency. Beauty with sensuality presented a danger to society because of what it symbolized, namely, a revolt against respectability as a principle of unity and order—thus, the destruction of the immutable values upon which society supposedly rested. If we are to understand the true significance of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, we must examine the relevant history in order to see how the forces of respectability coped with their "enemies" and what was at stake, for the exhibition itself was like the tip of an iceberg, and that iceberg has not yet melted.

Hitler pointed out at the 1934 Nazi party rally in Nuremberg that "anyone who seeks the new for its own sake strays all too easily into the realm of folly," a remark that was printed in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition guide. What was at issue was art as the expression of supposedly unchanging values in a society in search of such values. The modern age seemed to threaten the coherence of life itself. The accelerated pace of industrial and technological change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a certain disorientation, a "simultaneity of experience" with which people had to cope. By the mid-nineteenth century there were already complaints that railroad travel had destroyed nature, as the landscape performed a wild dance before the trains' windows. Just so, the invention of the telephone, the motorcar, and the cinema introduced a new velocity of time that menaced the unhurried pace of life in an earlier age. Such concerns were reflected in a heightened quest for order in the face of instability.

Respectability ensured security, order, and the maintenance of values, taming the chaos that seemed always to threaten society; it reflected people's attitudes toward themselves and toward all that was "different." The enemies of respectability, it was said, could not control themselves: they were creatures of instinct, with unbridled passions. Such accusations were scarcely to be found before the age of the French Revolution, but from then on they became common: whether it was Englishmen at the time of the Napoleonic wars claiming that the French were sending dancers to England to undermine the islanders' morality, or whether it was First World War propaganda seeking by means of words and pictures to impute to the enemy every kind of so-called sexual perversion, respectability was made a political issue from the very beginning.

Figure 19
Urban scene from the film *Der Tunnel* (The tunnel), 1933.

During the course of the nineteenth century an increasingly clear distinction was drawn between "normal" and "immoral" behavior, "normal" and "abnormal" sexuality. It was doctors, above all, using categories of health and sickness, who threw their weight behind society's constantly threatened moral norms, lending them legitimacy and thus defining the stereotypes of abnormality.

Those whom society treated as outsiders were now credited with all those characteristics that ran counter to society's image of itself. The mentally ill, Jews, homosexuals, and habitual criminals were all said to be physically unbalanced. Nervousness had been designated a serious illness—one that unleashed the passions—by the famous French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in the 1880s. It was now seen as the chief threat to mainstream bourgeois morality, which emphasized steadiness and restraint. Sharing the iconography of illness in general—exhaustion, contortions, and grimaces—nervousness was thought to symbolize the opposite of normative standards of beauty. The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition was built upon such views of the outsider, using modern art to construct a "chamber of horrors."

Looked at closely, nervousness itself was seen as a product of modernity. The outsiders were always city-dwellers (fig. 19), further proof that they scorned the tranquillity of eternal values: for them, time never stood still. One of the most despicable Nazi propagandists, Johann von Leers, expressed it in this way, no doubt speaking for many others in doing so: the city was the refuge of immorality and crime, and it was here that the "Jewish conspiracy" tried to gain control over German hearts and minds in order to drive them insane with frenzy and lust. For all its exaggeration and racial hatred, this view was still indebted to the nineteenth-century notion of respectability with its emphasis on controlling the passions and on the consequences of losing that control. There is a continuity here that we constantly encounter: the National Socialists' attitude toward sexuality cannot be separated from the general history of respectability.

Degeneration was, in its modern sense, a medical term used during the second half of the nineteenth century to identify the condition of those who had departed from the "normal" because of shattered nerves, inherited abnormalities, or behavioral or sexual excess. Degenerates could be identified by their bodily deformities, red eyes, feebleness, and exhaustion. Such conditions signaled the start of a process that would inevitably lead to destruction. What haunted society from the *fin de siècle* onward was the fear that not only humans but nations as well could degenerate, a process thought to have begun already because of the falling birth rates in France and other countries. Those who refused to conform to the moral dictates of society were labeled "degenerate," and as they themselves were doomed to destruction they might destroy society as well.

The physician Max Nordau in his book *Entartung* (Degeneration) of 1892 did much to popularize the term in its application to modern literature and art: modern artists, whether Impressionists or Expressionists, were incapable of reproducing nature because they had lost the faculty of accurate observation and painted instead distorted and irregular forms mirroring their own nervous deformities and stunted growth. In Hitler's view the artists in the 1937 exhibition symbolized degeneracy: "And what do you create?" the exhibition guide quotes Hitler as asking. "Misshapen cripples and cretins, women who can arouse only revulsion . . . as the expression of all that molds and sets its stamp on the present age." Against a background of attempts to define the boundaries of bourgeois morality, Hitler's pronouncement resurrects the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century iconography of the outsider as described by physicians such as Nordau. Moreover, it had the effect of advancing a certain concept of beauty as a readily understood symbol of society's values.

The ideal of beauty played a dominant role as a symbol of morality, extending far beyond the realm of art: beauty helped to maintain control over the passions. Friedrich Schiller, for example, in his series of letters *Über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the aesthetic education of mankind) of 1795 wrote that beauty

ennobled the otherwise merely instinctive sexual act, transcending it by virtue of its eternal values. But what is "beauty"? This question penetrated to the very heart of society's morals. In neoromantic or neoclassical art beauty became the self-portrait of society, the view it liked to have of itself.

How deeply respectability and its concept of beauty were embedded in society can be inferred from the ways in which the concept was presented long before National Socialism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it was religion, especially Protestantism, that took upon itself the task of promoting respectability, whereas by the end of the century that role had been assigned to the people themselves. The stricter attitude toward sodomy, which was made a criminal offense in many countries in *fin de siècle* Europe, appealed no longer to religious but to supposed popular sentiment. The clear and unambiguous distinction between the socially normal and the so-called deviant—a distinction that was now supported medically and iconographically as well as by religion and education—had been internalized. (Propagandaminister Joseph Goebbels knew he was risking very little when, in 1936, he banned art criticism on the grounds that the general public should make up its own mind; that year more paintings offered at the annual exhibition of German art were sold than at almost all earlier exhibitions.)

The achievement of beauty without sensuality presented a special challenge in the representation of the ideal male, who, inspired by Greek models, was often represented in the nude (fig. 20). The evolution of bourgeois morality was contemporaneous with the rediscovery of classical sculpture. J. J. Winckelmann, describing Greek male statuary as the paradigm of beauty for all time in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (History of the art of antiquity) of 1774, made this art acceptable to the middle classes by raising nudity to an abstract plane and turning it into a stylistic principle. Such beauty was perceived as somehow sexless, a conviction shared by others at a later date, aided by the belief that the almost transparent whiteness of these figures raised them above the personal and sensual. At roughly the same time Winckelmann wrote his famous book, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "Apollo Belvedere, why do you show yourself to us in all your nudity, making us ashamed of our own nakedness?" Male symbolism could not be stripped of all physicality; the beauty of the Greek youths—lithe and supple, muscular and harmonious bodies—lay in their nakedness. It was precisely the corporeality of the sculpture that expressed strength and harmony, order and dynamism, in other words, the ideal qualities of both burgher and nation (fig. 21). For the Nazis such men symbolized the true German upon whose commitment the Third Reich depended.

From the moment when bourgeois morality was first established, the ideals of male and female beauty differed radically, a circumstance that largely determined the political role of women as a national symbol. The male was regarded as dynamic, promising to bring about a timeless order and cure an ailing world; Friedrich

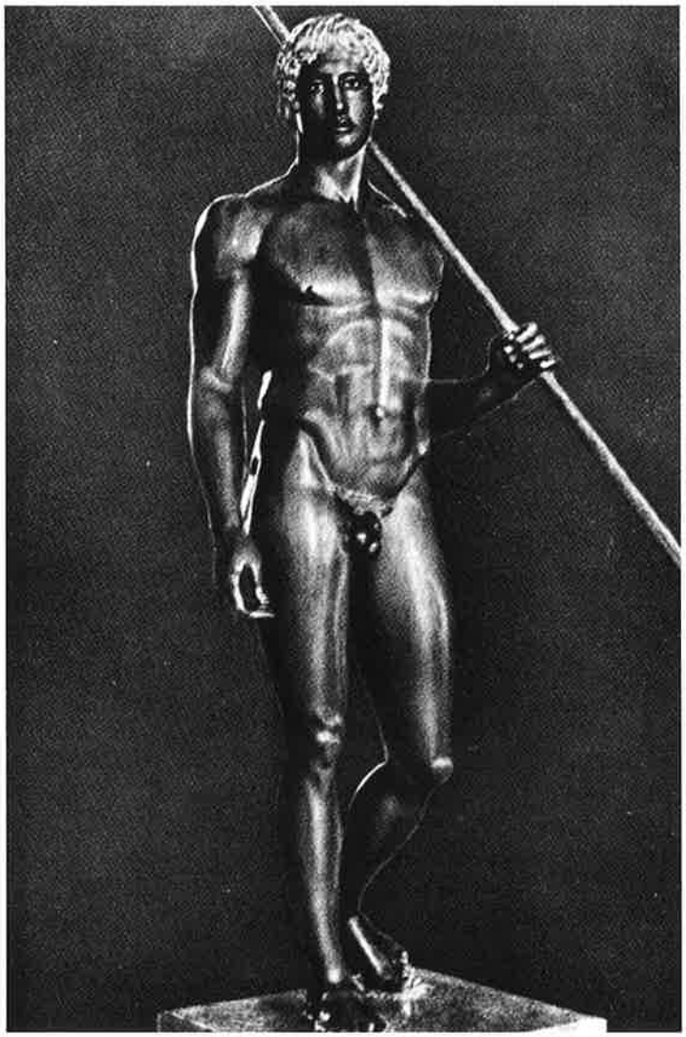

Figure 20
Speerträger (Spear-bearer), copy of the *Doryphobus* by Polyclitus (c. 450–420 B.C.), monument to the fallen of the First World War; bronze; formerly at the University of Munich.

Theodor Vischer, the nineteenth century's foremost German writer on aesthetics, assigned to beauty and manliness the task of preventing chaos. Women, by contrast, were turned into passive figures such as Germania or Queen Luise of Prussia (1776–1810), who was stylized as the "Prussian Madonna." While the male was often depicted nude, the woman was almost always fully clothed, at least to the extent that she functioned as a national symbol. And yet, for all their differences, public representations of men and women had one important point in common: they transcended sensuality.

The nakedness of the male stereotype displayed on so many Nazi buildings and monuments, however, never lost its unsettling and latently threatening effect. In this context it is not without significance that nudism was banned immediately after the Nazis came to power (it was said to deaden women's natural shame). On much the same level was a warning issued by the Reichsministerium des Innern (Reich ministry of the interior) in 1935 to the effect that nude bathing by people of the same sex could be seen as the first step toward the violation of Paragraph 175, which punished homosexual acts.

In its attempt to strip nakedness of its sensuality the Third Reich drew a sharp distinction between private life and public representation. Arno Breker's nude male sculptures (fig. 18) continued to be in official demand, and statues of seminude men and women still decorated public spaces. But it was an abstract, smooth, almost transparent nakedness and a frozen posture achieved by recourse to Winckelmann's purified concept of beauty.

The Nazis encouraged physical training, and here the problem of nudity arose once more. Hans Surén in his *Gymnastik der Deutschen* (German gymnastics) of 1938, a book that went through several editions during the Third Reich, exemplified the effort to divest the nude body of its sensuous appeal in this particular setting. He advocated nearly complete nudity in the pursuit of sport or while roaming though the countryside, but the male body had to be carefully prepared before it could be offered to public scrutiny: the skin had to be hairless, smooth, and bronzed. The body had become an abstract symbol of Aryan beauty, as it was in Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Olympic Games. Sensuality was transcended by an alignment with Greek form: figures that could be worshipped but neither desired nor loved.

And the Nazi view of women? Goebbels insisted that girls should be strong, healthy, and good to look at, which meant that, as he put it, in contrast to the male, the muscles of their arms and legs should not be visible. (The importance of iconography can be judged by the extent to which the Nazis described physical detail.) But how could this ideal of womankind be reconciled with the naked sportswoman, for the latter did indeed exist. The simple answer was that the female athlete's body was often approximated to that of the male. Without emphasizing the obvious feminine contours, it was thus, in principle, identical to that of the male youth in nakedness without sensuality.

Figure 21
Richard Scheibe, figure from an unidentified war memorial; bronze; location unknown.

Figure 22
Adolf Ziegler, *Akt* (Nude), 1939; oil on canvas, 86 x 145 cm (33⅞ x 57⅛ in.); Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich (on deposit).

While, on the one hand, Goebbels launched his attacks on "sports girls," on the other, the Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German girls) was liberating the mass of young girls for the first time in their history from some home and family restraints, an act of emancipation achieved through sports and country walks. The National Socialist view of women was clearly not free of incongruity. Perhaps the reason for this is that National Socialism was based on a consciously male society that often behaved in a contradictory way toward women. Male homosexuality, for example, was ruthlessly persecuted, but the same was not true of lesbianism, which was ignored as a punishable crime.

In the depiction of women the main concern was, once again, to separate private from public representation. In the private sphere women could be completely naked and sensual, for how else can we interpret the paintings by Hitler's favorite artist, Adolf Ziegler (fig. 22)—paintings that hung not only in the Führer's private apartments but also in the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*? Ziegler's fleshy and often full-bosomed nudes, who left nothing to the imagination, hung side by side with typical chaste German maidens with blond plaits. Public representation was political representation, however, and here the aim was to integrate the masses into the Third Reich with the aid of stereotypes that would treat the beautiful as a reflection of the eternal and immutable, revealing it as something pure and removed from all materialism and sensuality.

The ideal of manly beauty must be seen in contrast to the weak, exhausted, unmuscular figure of the outsider. The youthfulness of the male stereotype symbolized the dynamic of bourgeois society and of the nation as well; outsider figures, by contrast, were generally old. We find very few young Jews represented in nineteenth-century German drama, for example: they were almost without exception old and lonely.

Society expressed its morality in terms of generally accepted ideals of beauty while projecting its fears and ideas of ugliness onto the very groups the National Socialists were eventually determined to exterminate: Jews, homosexuals, habitual criminals, and the mentally disturbed. Even before the Nazis' electoral victory in 1930, Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist, had written in his book about the Weimar Republic, *Der Sumpf* (The swamp): "Democracy has apparently been stabilized. Yet with its pederasty, lesbianism, and procuration it has been defeated all along the line."

The open homosexuality of Ernst Röhm, the powerful chief of the SA (Sturmabteilung, storm troops), and other SA leaders was indicative of the ambivalent attitude toward bourgeois respectability on the part of some members of the early National Socialist movement. This is true of Hitler himself, who defended Röhm against attack by declaring that the latter's private life was his own affair as long as he used some discretion. When, in 1934, Hitler ordered the murder of Röhm and other leaders of the SA who were known homosexuals, it had in fact little to do with their sexual inclinations: the SA was by then threatening Hitler's own power and destroying

his relationship with the regular army. Be that as it may, the opportunity was seized to underline the role of the party and the regime as the defenders of respectability. Mock trials were held in which Catholic priests were accused of homosexuality, and the family was given a central role in National Socialist propaganda.

The foundations for such developments had been laid immediately after Hitler took power on January 30, 1933. As early as February 23 all so-called pornographic literature had been banned and prostitution drastically curbed. It is no wonder that organizations such as the Deutsch-Evangelische Sittlichkeitsbewegung (German evangelical morality league) welcomed Hitler's seizure of power, since it apparently brought an end to the moral chaos of the postwar period, and this was by no means the only organization of its kind that supported the Nazis in their self-styled role as the saviors of bourgeois morality. (Was it only Albert Speer's mother who voted for the Nazis because their youngsters marching though the streets of Berlin looked so neat?) Hitler himself boasted that with his advent the "nervous nineteenth century" had finally come to an end. But a threat to respectability remained.

The Nazi party sought to build upon wartime experiences by first presenting itself as a continuation of the male camaraderie that had existed in the trenches. Even when it broadened its base of appeal, it never lost the character of a *Männerbund*, a league of men, an institution that had a long tradition in Germany. Important subgroups of the party such as the SA or the SS (Schutzstaffel, elite guard) were proud of being male organizations that excluded "unmanly" men. But such conscious male bonding seemed to raise the danger of homoeroticism or even homosexuality, a possibility that frightened some of the leadership.

The driving force behind the purge of all that might pose a threat to respectability was Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, who more clearly than anyone else articulated the sexual policies of the Third Reich and thus revealed its underlying fears. (These same fears were also behind the organization of *Entartete Kunst*, which was an attempt to demonstrate the consequences of the rejection of social and sexual norms.) Himmler's obsessional regard for respectability and his fear of all sensuality encouraged him to magnify the homoerotic and homosexual potentialities of the *Männerbund*, including his own SS, which often represented itself symbolically as an idealized seminude male. If he emphasized the contrast between homosexuality and manliness, it was because of his fear that the one could easily turn into the other. At the same time he affirmed that the Third Reich was a state based upon the comradeship of men and that indeed "for centuries, yea, millennia, the Germans have been ruled as a *Männerstaat*" [state of men].

But that state was now threatened with self-destruction as a result of homosexuality, as Himmler made clear in November 1937 in a speech delivered to the SS leadership in Bad Tölz. He regarded homosexuality as a sickness that poisoned both body and mind (he even suggested prostitution—otherwise strictly prohibited—as a remedy), but he now went a stage further and drew on the imagery of the "natural" and "unnatural." In the good old days of the Teutonic tribes, Himmler told his Bad Tölz audience, homosexuals were drowned in the swamps: "This was no punishment, but simply the extinction of abnormal life." Nature rectified her own mistake, and Himmler lamented that this kind of extinction was no longer possible. For him, deviants from the sexual norm were not only outsiders, they were also racial enemies. The desire for their deaths, presented here as the goal of the struggle for purity and respectability, points the way to the Holocaust.

It must be stressed that doctors such as Charcot who described Jews as particularly subject to nervous diseases had never for a moment thought of killing them: for Charcot, anyone who was ill could be cured. It was racism that determined Himmler's offensive against outsiders, but it was also the wish to protect respectability, no matter what the price.

All this is the indispensable background to the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. It was designed to be out of the ordinary, a survey of all that was indecent and ugly, all that represented an assault on bourgeois morality through the latter's concept of beauty. Works by modern artists were treated not as evidence of individual creativity but as representative of something undesirable; they were accorded no individual value, only a symbolic status. This, of course, made a mockery of those artists who vaunted their individuality above all else. It was the reaction of a society that felt itself to be under a constant threat, a society, moreover, that was bonded together by respectability and the security that it radiated. Morality and its symbols, of which beauty was the positive and nervousness the negative, were an issue of the first order in an age when society believed itself on the very brink of chaos as a result of the pace of change and the Great War. In this context the concept of "degenerate art" merely added to the general sense of anxiety.

And yet foreign newspapers reported in 1937 that far more people had visited *Entartete Kunst* than the parallel exhibition devoted to officially approved German art. According to the *Manchester Guardian* there were five times as many visitors to *Entartete Kunst* each day, while the *New York Times* reported that there had been 396,000 visitors, as opposed to 120,000 at the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, within the space of a week. What is the explanation? It is a question that is difficult to answer, but it is unlikely that an interest in modern art played any part. The Nazis themselves encouraged people to visit the exhibition. Had the latent temptation to act unconventionally—a temptation almost encouraged by the Reich's antibourgeois rhetoric—become acute once more?

Respectability and all that it implied remained an essential part of the regime, and in the exhibition guide all those outsiders who had threatened society's conformist principles since the beginning of the last century were blamed for the degeneration of art. The paintings on display were presented as the work of madmen disfigured by sexual excesses; they represented Marxist and Jewish attacks on all that was German. The text of the guide summed up a tradition that drew an increasingly sharp distinction between respectability—that is, normality—and abnormality, between the healthy and the sick, and between the natural and the unnatural. By embracing the respectable, people could resist the chaos of the age embodied by "degenerate" art and accept a "slice of eternity" into their lives. What was sacrificed in the process was sensuality, passion, and, to a great extent, individuality itself.

The analysis of "beauty without sensuality" undertaken here can be seen as a critique of bourgeois morality and, finally, of the never-ending attempt to distinguish between this morality, viewed as the norm, and what was seen as "abnormal." But we must never forget that for most people respectability was and is much more than merely a form of behavior or an ideal of beauty; for many, perhaps even for the vast majority, it offers cogent proof of the cohesiveness of society, a cohesiveness necessary for all systems of government, not just for National Socialism. Hence, the favorable response encountered by the premise of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, even in places where we would least expect it: the London *New Statesman*, for example, a left-wing journal, wrote that the exhibition was the best thing Mr. Hitler had done so far.

The smooth functioning of a generally accepted morality was just as important for the cohesion of society as the more often cited economic and social factors. At the same time it was something that people understood, something that impinged on their daily lives in a wholly concrete and comprehensive way. The ideal of beauty as the exemplification of society's norms was influenced not only by sentimentalism and romanticism, it had a social function as well. The aesthetics of politics, of daily life, had involved a degree of social control ever since bourgeois morality first came into being. Not only the works of art but much of the popular literature was filled with passion and love that were supposedly devoid of sensuality. For example, Agnes Günther's novel *Die Heilige und ihr Narr* (The saint and her fool, 1913), a runaway best-seller during the Weimar Republic, was a sentimental love story in which sensuality was equated with sickness. The representational art and the literature of the time fell readily into a tradition that the National Socialists merely took to its extreme.

And today? If my analysis is correct, I can only say that the same social needs still exist, that our modern tolerance toward the individual and sensuality is more an extension of what is permissible than an actual breach in the principle of respectability. There may be additional proof of this in the fact that after periods of sexual tolerance the limits are always reimposed. We are seeing this rhythm repeated today, in episodes like that of the Mapplethorpe exhibition and in the continued effort in the United States to control the erotic content of publicly funded art.

Marcel Proust gave perhaps the finest expression to that reciprocal relationship between conformism and tolerance that we can see all around us: Swann, the Jewish hero of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is welcomed among the aristocratic and snobbish Guermantes as an exotic plant until he becomes a Dreyfusard, defending the captain against his reactionary accusers, at which point they see him as a threat to their political and social position. This seems to me to symbolize the reality of a situation in which we continue to find ourselves: bourgeois morality, once a newcomer in our midst, now appears so much a part of the way we see ourselves, so essential to our society, that we can scarcely imagine a different kind of morality, with the result that we have forgotten that, like everything else in this world, it is the result of historical evolution. ■

Note

This is a revised version of the author's article "Schönheit ohne Sinnlichkeit: Nationalsozialismus und Sexualität," *Zeitmitschrift*, special ed., 1987, 96–109. See also his *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).