

EN

GURLITT

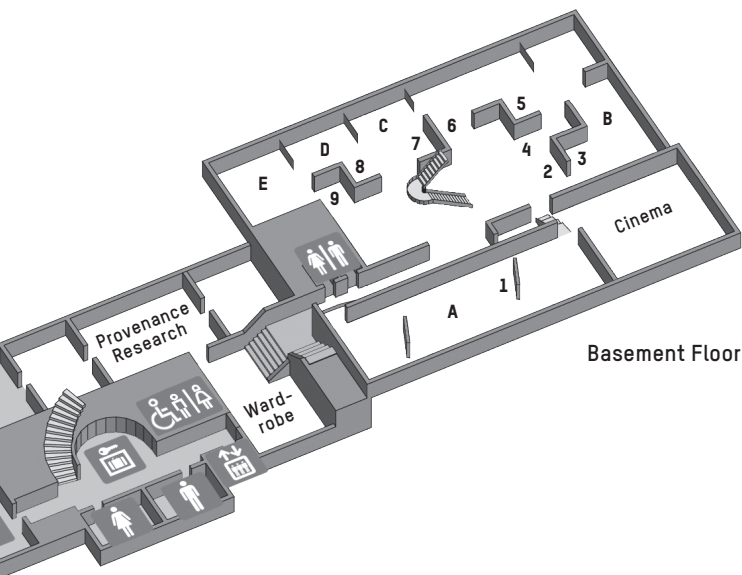
**Status Report “Degenerate Art” –
Confiscated and Sold**

02.11.2017 – 04.03.2018

**KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN**

EXHIBITION GUIDE

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Introduction

The exhibition is a first and preliminary presentation of the items in the inventory of the “Gurlitt art trove.” In face of the discovery of this cache of artworks and further pending research, we are taking the opportunity of investigating, by setting an example, the art policy of the Nazis and their systematic looting of art. The Kunstmuseum Bern and the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn worked in close collaboration on this project.

Here in Bern we are presenting the aspect of “degenerate art,” elucidating it in a broader context that also takes into account events and the state of affairs in Switzerland. In particular we are spotlighting the fates of the ostracized artists and their persecution by the Nazis, as well as the life of Hildebrand Gurlitt in all its contradictions.

In our “Studio Provenance Research” you can gain important insights into the methods and challenges of provenance research.

What is the “Gurlitt art trove”?

The “Gurlitt art trove” comprises artworks that were in the possession of Cornelius Gurlitt (1932–2014), son of the German art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895–1956). Most of the artworks were seized in 2012 in Cornelius Gurlitt’s Munich apartment after tax investigations. The public learned about the “art trove” through a report in the November 3, 2013 issue of “Focus” magazine. The news received an unbelievable world-wide resonance among the press. With the further discovery of additional pieces in Cornelius Gurlitt’s house in Salzburg, the total number of artworks in his possession amounted to over 1500 objects. Of these works we are now, in Bern, showing those that the Nazis classified as “degenerate art” and where suspicion of being art looted by the Nazis could not be substantiated.

What is “degenerate” art?

“Degenerate art” (“entartete Kunst”) was a term the Nazis exploited for propaganda purposes. During the Nazi dictatorship in Germany it was used to decry modern art and artists with Jewish backgrounds. The term “degenerate” has its origins in scientific racism and, at the close of the nineteenth century, was adopted for art contexts. It was a term that the National Socialists in Germany wielded for judging the worth of artists based on racial criteria and to enforce their own ideological canon in art. The Nazi regime condemned as “degenerate” all art and cultural movements that did not comply with its artistic ideals. The new forms of art – expressionism, dada, new objectivity, surrealism, cubism, and fauvism – all fitted into this category. Moreover, all art by artists with Jewish backgrounds was classified as “degenerate.” And literature, music, or even architecture could also be disqualified as such.

For this exhibition we have selected works from the Gurlitt holdings that were executed by artists who were persecuted by the Nazis as “degenerate.” Thus our exhibition not only showcases works that were seized from German public collections as part of the “degenerate art” campaign, but also includes artworks that Hildebrand Gurlitt acquired prior to and after the state confiscations of 1937 and 1938. The current state of research on the provenance of each work is provided.

Why Bern?

We can not say for certain why Cornelius Gurlitt named the Kunstmuseum Bern his sole heir and only speculate as to the real reason. Even though Cornelius Gurlitt did visit the Kunstmuseum Bern, he had no special personal connection to it. However, he had links to Bern through business contacts to galleries and auction houses, as well as the memories of visits to his uncle, Wilibald Gurlitt, who taught musicology from 1946 to 1948 in Bern.

The Gurlitts

The history of the Gurlitts goes way back. Since the eighteenth century the family was well established in the art scene.

Hildebrand Gurlitt could draw on the family name and reputation of his forefathers. He was born in 1895 as the youngest of three children. His father, the architect and art historian Cornelius Gurlitt (1850–1838), was professor at the Royal Saxon University of Technology in Dresden. Hildebrand's grandfather, Louis Gurlitt (1812–1897), was a successful landscape painter of landscape scenes from Norway to Greece. His aunt was the writer Fanny Lewald.

The name Gurlitt opened many doors for Hildebrand – and at the same time his upper middle-class background expected that he successfully pursue a career. As a musicologist, Wilibald (1889–1963) set the pace for his younger brother. His sister Cornelia (1890–1919) chose an artistic vocation.

Fritz Gurlitt (1854–1893) was the family's successful art dealer and publisher. He was brother to Hildebrand's father and as early as 1883 mounted works by the French impressionists at his Berlin gallery. He died early and his widow had a falling out with the remainder of the Gurlitt family. This conflict is indicative of Hildebrand Gurlitt's difficult relationship with his cousin Wolfgang Gurlitt (1888–1965), who continued running his late father's gallery.

After completing his studies in art history in Frankfurt on the Main, Berlin and the city of his birth, Dresden, Hildebrand was appointed director of the Museum Zwickau (1925–1930) and the Hamburger Kunstverein (1931–1933). In Zwickau he extended the collection of contemporary art and in Hamburg promoted local groups of artists. While still a student, Gurlitt sought to forge contacts with avant-garde artists and, as a museum director and art dealer, he fostered relationships to collectors and gallery owners. This ensured his success later as an independent dealer.

Die Kunstwerke A – E

A The Berlin Secession

The Berlin Secession artists' association was founded in 1898 to counterbalance the dominance of the academic art scene. The goal of the association was to provide opportunities for its members to exhibit their work. The Berlin Secession developed into a melting pot for modern approaches in art, especially for impressionism and early expressionism. Outstanding artists shaped its profile, among them the Norwegian Edvard Munch – as well as Max Liebermann, a founding member and long-term president of the association, not to mention his successor Lovis Corinth.

Hildebrand Gurlitt's generation regarded the Secession artists as the founders of modernism in Germany. Individual members were in close contact with the Gurlitts. Corinth and Munch painted portraits of Wolfgang Gurlitt, the Berlin art dealer. And Hildebrand Gurlitt, as director of the Museum Zwickau, did all he could to realize an exhibition of Munch's art. The "Gurlitt art trove" contained a large number of diverse works by all three artists – Liebermann, Corinth, and Munch.

Lovis Corinth died in 1925. The Nazis ostracized his late work as "degenerate." His widow Charlotte Behrend-Corinth emigrated to the United States owing to her Jewish background. Nazi sympathizers in Oslo exhibited Edvard Munch's works there in the 1942 exhibition "Art and Non Art". In 1933 Liebermann was forced to relinquish his honorary presidency of the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts for being Jewish. He died shortly afterwards in 1935.

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945)

Käthe Kollwitz trained as an artist at schools for women artists in Berlin and Munich. Her sculptures and prints adopted a style that combined elements of realism and expressionism. Since 1898 Kollwitz was a member of the Berlin Secession and, in 1919, she was the first woman to be appointed professor at the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts. Due to her political commitment she was dismissed from her position at the academy and had to give up her master classes. In 1934 she obtained a workspace in a communal studio on Klosterstrasse.

Her art addresses socially relevant subjects like poverty, hunger, and the realities of the lives of contemporary women. Her sculptures “Trauerndes Elternpaar” (“Mourning Parents,” 1914–1932) and “Pietà” (1937–1938/39) are her attempts to come to terms with the death of her son Peter. An enlarged copy of the latter sculpture today stands in the Neue Wache in Berlin, the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Dictatorship.

Owing to her radical pacifism, her work disappeared from public collections and was banned from exhibitions. Only a small circle of colleagues and art enthusiasts knew of her work. Contrarily, nothing by Kollwitz was on show at the infamous Munich exhibition “Degenerate Art”.

B Die Brücke

In June 1905, Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff – students of architecture in Dresden – founded Die Brücke (The Bridge) group of artists. In 1906 Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde also joined the group and Otto Mueller followed in 1910. Their mutual goal was to strive for vitality and immediacy in artistic expression. This group of artists developed a visual vocabulary that is now known as expressionism.

When only eleven years old, Hildebrand Gurlitt visited the first Brücke exhibition in Dresden with his mother. This art shocked his still immature taste in art, but to an equal degree it undeniably fascinated him. Later Gurlitt was to describe this experience and how the barbaric quality of the passionately strong colors, the crudeness of the extremely makeshift frames, was like a slap in the face. During the First World War Gurlitt developed a strong affinity to expressionism. In Vilnius he served in the military together with Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. As museum director in Zwickau he strongly exerted his influence after 1925 for the acquisition and exhibitions of works by Brücke artists. Later he fostered a special preference also for collecting and dealing with works by these artists, in fact they constitute the heart of his collection. Many of the works from this group of artists in the “Gurlitt art trove” were obtained in conjunction with the confiscations related to the “degenerate art” campaign.

All of the Brücke artists were branded as “degenerate” after 1937, and hundreds of their works were confiscated from German museums as a consequence. As late as 1934 Erich Heckel still publicly acknowledged his commitment to the ideals of Hitler and the Nazis. But this did not help him as his art was nevertheless classified as “degenerate.” In 1941, Schmidt-Rottluff was expelled from the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts (Reichskammer der bildenden Künste), which amounted to an occupational ban.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938)

In the Weimar Republic, Kirchner was regarded as one of Germany's most important contemporary artists, despite the fact that he lived in Davos from 1917 onwards. As early as January 20, 1933, he knew for certain that, "seen from abroad, Germany would again be a nation without art." Only shortly afterwards he wrote that where he was staying there were terrible rumors going around about the persecution of Jews and that premonitions of war could not be overlooked. He added that in the museums the great cultural efforts of the last twenty years were being obliterated. Kirchner felt increasingly threatened by mounting national socialist agitation in Davos.

In 1937, 639 of Kirchner's works were seized from German museums and later some of them sold abroad or destroyed. Thirty-two of his paintings and watercolors were on show at the Munich exhibition "Degenerate Art". In the same year he was expelled from the Prussian Academy. Kirchner was considering submitting an application for Swiss citizenship in the fall of 1937. With the German Reich's annexation of Austria he began to experience hallucinations, fearing that German soldiers would suddenly appear at his Wildboden house. Kirchner destroyed all his wood blocks, sculptures, and personal documents. He committed suicide on June 15, 1938.

Emil Nolde (1867–1956)

The art policy of the Nazis remained unclear even after they seized power. Supporters of modern art began a campaign in 1933 in an attempt to make expressionism an official state art. For Joseph Goebbels, Emil Nolde and Ernst Barlach were "prototypes of northern artists." This position was opposed by the Militant League for German Culture (Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur). Nazi art ideologists considered expressionism to be a consequence of "racial chaos" in Germany.

Hitler personally decided the "debate on expressionism." He determined the fate of modern art in Germany at the annual Nazi party rally in

Nuremberg in 1935. Goebbels complied and henceforth devoted himself to the persecution of expressionist artists.

In 1937, 1052 works by Emil Nolde were confiscated from German museums. Nolde protested against the defamation of his art. He was a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) as early as 1920 and, in 1933, together with Ernst Barlach, Erich Heckel, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and others, publicly announced his allegiance to Adolf Hitler. He emphasized the "Germanness of his art" and demanded that his confiscated property be returned to its rightful owner. Instead he was expelled in 1941 from the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts. He retired to north Germany and lived there in his studio in isolation, executing his "unpainted paintings" – a series of over 1300 watercolors on small sheets of paper.

C Der Blaue Reiter

Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) stands for artistic change. Between 1908 and 1914, a group of artists in Munich gathered around the influential art figures Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Alexei Jawlensky, Gabriele Münter, Paul Klee, August Macke, Heinrich Campendonk, and Marianne von Werefkin belonged to the inner circle of the group. Influenced by the fauves, cubism, and orphism, the goal of Der Blaue Reiter was to liberate color, line, and planes from their representational function in art. Painting was no longer to imitate reality but express the inner self in visual terms. As a painter and the author of the treatise "On the Spiritual in Art" (1911), Wassily Kandinsky pointed the way to abstraction. The conception of art shared by the group was also exemplified in the almanac of Der Blaue Reiter (1912).

Hildebrand Gurlitt collected works of art from Der Blaue Reiter artists. When he opened up his *Kunstkabinett Dr. H. Gurlitt* in Hamburg on November 1, 1935, he placed an advert in "Weltkunst," a magazine for art dealers, that he was looking to purchase "only the very best watercolors by Marc, Corinth through to the abstract artists."

In 1937, works hanging in German museums by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Alexei Jawlensky, Paul Klee, August Macke, and Heinrich Campendonk were seized for the propaganda exhibition "Degenerate Art" in Munich.

Franz Marc (1880–1916)

The expressionist painter Franz Marc emphasized color in his paintings; it stands for spiritual values and natural forces. He believed in the cathartic power of war, and hence volunteered for military service in August 1914. In 1916 he was killed in action near Verdun.

In 1933 the National Socialist press still celebrated Marc's paintings as "a motivating force of the national revolution." However, in 1937 and 1938, 130 of his works were confiscated from public collections, among

them the painting "The Tower of Blue Horses" (1913), which was already famous by that time. The painting hung in the exhibition "Degenerate Art" for only four days. The painting was removed from the exhibition owing to the outcry of members of the German Officers' Association. They voiced their protest to the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts against publicly discrediting a fallen soldier. However, four other paintings executed by Marc remained in the exhibition for its entire duration. According to an agreement between Hitler, Goebbels, and Goering, Marc's most famous work was to be sold overseas to obtain hard currency. Instead it is assumed that Hermann Goering appropriated the painting for himself. From 1945 onward all efforts to trace the whereabouts of this key work of expressionism remained fruitless.

D The Bauhaus

In 1919 the Bauhaus School was founded by the architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in Weimar. This art school pursued the goal of combining art, the applied arts, and crafts to invent a modern design vocabulary.

As the director of the Museum Zwickau, Hildebrand Gurlitt promoted expressionism and abstract art by means of exhibitions and purchases. He was particularly proud of his gallery in which he brought together the works of the expressionists Erich Heckel and Christian Rohlfs with those of the abstract artists, among the latter were Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. The Bauhaus student Heinrich Koch designed the color scheme of the gallery rooms and perfected the whole with furniture by Marcel Breuer. Also the invitations and the museum posters stand out on account of their objective-constructive typography typical for the Bauhaus.

The school in Weimar was closed in 1924 and the one in Dessau in 1932 following pressure from the Nazis. In 1933 the doors were also closed to its last bastion in Berlin. Oskar Schlemmer's life was severely impacted by Nazi vilification too; the former Bauhaus teacher lost his job as professor at the United State College of Art in Berlin as early as 1932. He then managed to earn a living by designing camouflage patterns for a company producing paint. Hundreds of works by Bauhaus teachers and artists who supported the ideas of the institution were seized from German museums from 1937 onwards and discredited as "degenerate" in the exhibition "Degenerate Art".

Paul Klee (1879–1940)

From 1931 onwards, Paul Klee taught at the Dusseldorf State Academy of Fine Art. In January 1933, the Nazis searched his house and temporarily confiscated his correspondence to his wife Lily. He was publicly accused of being Jewish before he was dismissed from his position at the academy on May 1 on the grounds of being a "degenerate" artist.

At the close of 1933 he emigrated to his birthplace, the city of Bern. The exhibition "Degenerate Art" had seventeen works by Paul Klee on show, and his painting was ridiculed as "confusion" and "disorder." One of his paintings was even likened to the work of "a mentally deranged person." Klee was finding it increasingly difficult to sell his art and his financial situation grew desperate. He reflected on his experience of marginalization in numerous pieces. Exhibitions in Paris, London, and New York celebrated the work of persecuted artists in response to Nazi Germany's vilification of modernism. This opened up new markets for Klee so that his financial situation improved. As early as possible he applied for Swiss citizenship in 1939, but died in 1940 before it was made official.

E Late Expressionism and Verism

In the 1920s many artists addressed the terrible things they experienced as soldiers during the First World War as well as the dire economic problems and social tension of the young Weimar Republic. They engaged thematically with life in modern cities, with poverty and suffering, high life and debauchery. What they illustrated was often exaggerated and caricature-like. The artists sought to capture the reality of their age in uncompromising and extreme images. Famous representatives of this position in art are George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Max Beckmann.

Like so many young men of his generation, Hildebrand Gurlitt volunteered in 1914 for military service. Again like so many others, he suffered a severe psychological crisis through the experience of war. As director of the Museum Zwickau, Gurlitt later did what he could to support artists such as Dix and Kollwitz, who were critical of the war and its consequences in their art. In the 1920s Hildebrand Gurlitt corresponded regularly with Dix. In his *Kunstkabinett* or gallery, Gurlitt repeatedly mounted works by Grosz, Dix, and Beckmann, all of whom faced vicious verbal attacks after the Nazis came to power.

Max Beckmann was dismissed without notice in April 1933 from *Städelschule*, Frankfurt's state college of fine art, where he was professor. Later he emigrated to Amsterdam and, after the war, to the United States. George Grosz was living in the United States by that time, as already in the Weimar Republic he had to face charges of "defamation of the Reichswehr" (Armed Forces of the Weimar Republic) shortly before the Nazis came to power.

Otto Dix (1891–1969)

Just as August Macke, Franz Marc, or Max Beckmann had volunteered to serve in the military in 1914, Otto Dix followed suit. While the war was still in full force, he worked on drawings that engaged with its events and realities.

When the war ended, Dix again took up his art studies at the applied arts college in Dresden. In 1919 he was a co-founder of the Dresden Secession Group, also known as Gruppe 1919 (1919 Group). His experiences in the war remained pivotal in shaping his art. In the following years he executed the work "The Cripples of War" (1920) or his anti-war painting "War" (1929–1932), in a style leaning resembling that of the old masters.

After 1933, Dix was one of the first art professors to be dismissed. In 1936 he moved with his family to the south of Germany and lived a secluded life in the country. In 1937, numerous works of his were presented at the exhibition "Degenerate Art" and were, among other insults, abused as "sabotage of the nation's military defense in paint." Two weeks after the attempted assassination of Hitler in 1939 at the Munich inn Bürgerbräukeller, the Gestapo arrested Otto Dix only to release him again. In 1945 the artist was conscripted for the Volkssturm, Germany's last ditch defense at the end of the war, and was taken as a prisoner of war by the French. In February 1946 he returned to live in Hemmenhofen on Lake Constance, where he died in 1969.

The Contexts 1–9

1 Attack Against Modernism

Since the end of the nineteenth century, realism and impressionism were much criticized in the public arena in Germany just as they were in other European countries. The break with an academic understanding of art as an ideal form of representation was largely rejected among the general public and the political ruling classes.

The German Emperor, Wilhelm II (1859–1918), condemned the new forms of expression in art such as impressionism and realism. In his speech “Die wahre Kunst” (“True art,” 1901), he emphasized the educational character of works of art. In the eyes of the emperor, art was governed by a natural “law” that complied with the universal principles of beauty, which had been first honed to perfection in antiquity and the Renaissance. According to Wilhelm II, the art of Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, and Käthe Kollwitz was a step backward, the descent of art into the gutter.

The term “degeneration” or “Entartung” was coined at the time for deviations from a presumed cultural norm. The Jewish physician and writer Max Nordau (1849–1923) transposed the medical term “Entartung” or “degeneration” to art and literature, thereby characterizing the protagonists of modern approaches as the pathological phenomena of general decline.

Hence a pattern of argument used by the Nazis was formulated already early in the twentieth century – rejection of critical, socially engaged art and belief in a “healthy,” “Germanic” art.

*“Art that defies and challenges the rules that I declare valid is not art.”
Wilhelm II, German Emperor, “Die wahre Kunst” („True Art“), 1901*

Degeneration or Entartung

Disqualifying art as “degenerate” stands for the Nazi ostracization of modernism in Germany. Hitler and his party liners did not, however, invent the term. But they do have the dubious honor of having implemented it in a targeted way. Entartung or degeneration means in medicine and biology the deviation from the norm. At the close of the nineteenth century the term was adopted in science of racism and critique of contemporary civilization.

The criminologist Cesare Lombroso was the first to construe a link between criminal inclination, the creative genius, and degeneration. It was to Lombroso that Max Nordau dedicated his polemic against the leading contemporary art movements. In his book “Degeneration,” Nordau applied the term to the art of his times, branding it as a pathological aberration.

“There might be a sure means of proving that the application of the term ‘degenerates’ to the originators of all the fin-de-siècle movements in art and literature is not arbitrary, that it is no baseless conceit, but a fact; and that would be a careful physical examination of the persons concerned, and an inquiry into their pedigree. In almost all cases, relatives would be met with who are undoubtedly degenerate, and one or two stigmata discovered which would indisputably establish the diagnosis of ‘Degeneration’.”

Max Nordau, “Entartung,” Berlin 1892

“Degeneration,” London 1895

2 Art of Decay

The democratic forms of government of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) favored the spread of modern art. The catchword “Weimar culture” stands for social liberalization, which made cultural diversity possible and also opened the way for mounting modernist art in museums.

The rise of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) increasingly put pressure on museum directors who exhibited or purchased anti-war pictures, expressionist, abstract, or verist art and engaged in educating the public. The “Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur” (Militant League for German Culture) was closely affiliated to the NSDAP and its insurgents and members encouraged skepticism toward artistic diversity by means of targeted campaigns. They profited from the widespread ignorance about art among the general public.

In the eyes of the critics and enemies of democracy, modernist art represented artistic decadence as a symptom of social decline. They firmly believed that its success was a consequence of the “sick” republic. Nazi and völkisch (race-nationalist) circles championed an art that was easily understood by everybody and represented so-called “German values.” In their attacks on modernist art, they denounced it as elitist, decadent, or “degenerate” with the intention of marginalizing the artists and their work on the grounds of it being inherently “un-German.”

“Sixty years ago, an exhibition of so-called Dada type “experiences” would have been absolutely impossible and its promoters would have been sent to the insane asylum. And yet today, they are made presidents of art associations. This disease could not have made its appearance at that time because public opinion would not have tolerated it, nor would the State have sat idly by. It is the responsibility of government to prevent its people from being driven into the arms of intellectual insanity.”

Adolf Hitler, “Mein Kampf” (“My Struggle”), Munich 1925

Hildebrand Gurlitt in Zwickau

In 1925 Hildebrand Gurlitt was appointed director of the Museum Zwickau. In only a year he devised a museum conception that united old and contemporary art alongside the city's historical and geological collections. Exhibitions showcasing contemporary artists alternated with presentations of old art and subjects likely to attract a large audience.

He mounted shows of nineteenth-century painting and exhibitions such as "Wohnung und Hausrat" (Household and Household Items; 1926) or "Kunst und Kitsch" (Art and Kitsch, 1927) – as well as showcasing the work of Käthe Kollwitz (1926), Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1927), Emil Nolde (1928), and Christian Rohlf (1930). Hildebrand Gurlitt's exhibitions were pioneering feats in the industrial city and stirred up highly vocal opposition. In 1930 Hildebrand Gurlitt was, under the pretext of lack of funds, dismissed from his post as museum director.

"The horrible thing about this cultural backlash is that it is not directed against works of a political nature, but against purely artistic, aesthetic works, identified with 'Bolshevism' merely because they are new, unusual, different, original. ... If this movement should spread, the great danger is that spontaneous artistic creation, the old tradition of artistic freedom, will be destroyed and the artists robbed of their naïveté of thought and expression."

Oskar Schlemmer, Diary, November 27, 1930

Pathologization

Swiss collectors and institutions supported modernism already early in its development, especially modern French art. But in Switzerland too there were instances among the general public where modern art found little sympathy. This, however, had no political implications. A distinguished example is C.G. Jung's interpretation of the visual vocabulary used by Picasso in his art. Jung wrote on the 1932 Picasso exhibition in Zurich:

"Patients can be divided into two groups: those who are neurotic and those who are schizophrenic. [...] The latter [...] produce paintings that openly reveal their feelings of alienation. Without exception, their artworks do not convey a feeling of unity or harmony, but one of conflicting emotions – or even the total lack of emotion [...]. At a purely formal level inner conflict predominates. It is expressed in what one might call "ruptures," that is, elements that express psychological rifts of a kind. The pictures leave the beholders cold or are alarming owing to their paradoxical, emotionally distressing, ghastly, or bizarre audaciousness toward their viewers. Picasso belongs to this group."

C.G. Jung, in: Neue Züricher Zeitung, November 13, 1932

3 “Against the un-German Spirit”

From 1933 the National Socialist German Workers’ Party governed Germany. With a series of new laws, the government in effect quashed the democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic and laid the cornerstone for the persecution of different groups of the German population. All spheres of public and private life were to be reformed in accordance with Nazi ideals and ideology. It was also the death knell for freedom in art.

But a politico-cultural program did not yet exist in 1933. Instead the regime demonstrated its power in destructive measures. On the basis of the Law on Reconstruction of the Civil Service issued on April 11, 1933, Jews, Social Democrats, and Communists were removed from the civil service. This affected museum directors, artists, and art historians at the academies and universities. The newly created Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer) controlled the press, film, theater, museums, art, music, and literature.

On May 10, 1933, the new ruling power openly demonstrated its willingness to violence and destruction by publicly burning books in front of Berlin’s university and in the subsequent “campaign against the un-German spirit,” in which many thousands of books by Jewish authors and by alleged Marxists – as well as those with pacifist content – were publicly burned. This growing radicalization led in 1937 to the “degenerate art” campaign.

The Nationalist movement in Switzerland shared the ideals of fascism and the National Socialists. Initially the movement experienced successes in 1933, but its appeal rapidly declined as the dictatorship in Germany became established.

Conformity in Art

All artists in Germany had to make clear their stance toward National Socialism. If people wanted to work in the fields of art, journalism, or any kind of politico-cultural position they had to be committed to the Hitler regime and be able to verify that they were “Arian.” From Septem-

ber 1933, it was mandatory to be a member of the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts for permission to exhibit in public. If applicants were refused membership or expelled they were in effect barred from pursuing their careers as artists.

Emigration was often the only means for such artists of finding a chance to earn a living. Switzerland was one of the countries where they sought refuge. However, Switzerland successively tightened its immigration laws from 1938 onwards, making it increasingly difficult for persecuted persons to enter the country.

Forced Sales

The persecution of the Jews forced them to sell their art, ranging from individual pieces to entire collections. It was very difficult for them to take these objects along on their flight, and for people leaving the country Reich Flight Tax was demanded for artworks to the amount of their current value. Collectors were therefore forced to try and sell their artworks in auctions. These had all the appearance of normal art auctions and nothing in common with “garage sales” for selling household items. However, insiders knew about the conditions under which this art was being put onto the market, and that it was, at least partly, sold under its current market value due to the dire situations of the people trying to sell it.

4 The “Degenerate Art” Exhibition

In the summer of 1937, the Nazi regime staged the defamatory exhibition “Degenerate Art” in Munich. The exhibition at the gallery building at Hofgarten in Munich, was home to the exhibition that vilified works by artists such as Franz Marc, Otto Dix, and Paul Klee, among others. The paintings and sculptures were pilloried for all to see with disparaging comments like “sick” and “un-Germanic.” The works of art on show were from German museums and public galleries. They had been confiscated from the collections prior to the exhibition by a commission of the Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts.

The term “entartet” or “degenerate” was not definitively defined. The art that was thrown into this category were expressionist and abstract works, but the term was also applied to anti-war art as well as to art by Socialists, Communists, and Jews.

The exhibition in Munich had its precursors. Since 1933, German museums had been making their contribution to the denigration of modernist artists in “chambers of horror” and so-called “exhibitions of shame”. These campaigns consciously built on the fact that the general public largely had little understanding and knowledge of contemporary art. More than two million people visited the “Degenerate art” exhibition in Munich. With modifications, the propaganda exhibition traveled until 1941 to thirteen different cities of the German Reich.

Simultaneously the “Great German Art Exhibition” opened its doors to the public at the House of German Art. The new exhibition building provided a majestic stage for the “Third Reich” to present itself as a cultural nation.

Munich’s art summer of 1937 was to mark the turning of the tide in National Socialist art policy. After the “degenerate art” campaign, artists were increasingly less at liberty to pursue their art as they wished. Furthermore, the museums were no longer allowed to exhibit works by Jewish artists.

The Great German Art Exhibition

The „Great German Art Exhibition“ took place annually from 1937 to 1944 at the House of German Art in Munich. Landscapes and genre paintings, still lifes, and portraits – as well as small sculptures – dominated among the exhibits. Special exhibitions were mounted for the work of Nazi artists such as Arno Breker, Josef Thorak, and Werner Peiner. Even if only a few of these works were flagrant examples of National Socialist propaganda, they all nevertheless complied with the ideology of the Nazi regime. By 1944, 12'550 exhibits had been sold. The buyers were above all the Nazi elite, but there were private purchasers among them too.

5 Rescuing Art or Exploitation?

The confiscation of modern art from German museums continued after August 1937. More than 20'000 artworks by 1,400 artists were seized from over one hundred German museums, among them also works by the Swiss artists Cuno Amiet, Paul Camenisch, and Johannes Itten.

The confiscated works were first kept in storage depots in Berlin, as for example at the Viktoria-Speicher and at Schloss Schoenhausen. The expropriation of artworks from museums was legalized post factum on May 31, 1938, by passing the "Law on the Confiscation of Products of Degenerate Art." Hermann Goering suggested a plan to sell modern art abroad for hard currency, and Hitler prompted a swap in return for works by the old masters. Artworks that could not be exploited in either way were burned on March 20, 1939, in the courtyard of the main fire station in Berlin.

This wanton destruction led those who acted as middle-men in selling the works to see themselves, after 1945, as rescuers of this art. The auction of confiscated works at Fischer Gallery in Lucerne in 1939 attracted international interest. But most of the art was sold as individual pieces on behalf of the German Reich. These transactions largely took place through the art dealers Bernhard A. Böhmer, Karl Buchholz, Hildebrand Gurlitt, and Ferdinand Moeller.

Bernhard A. Böhmer (1892–1945) was an intimate and the assistant of the sculptor Ernst Barlach. Initially Böhmer was the only agent selling Barlach's works, which he still was able to sell to collectors despite the fact that such action was officially outlawed. In 1938, the Reich Ministry of Propaganda authorized him and other art dealers to profitably turn the confiscated degenerate works into cash. When Böhmer committed suicide in 1945, large quantities of this art were still in storage in Güstrow.

Ferdinand Möller (1882–1956) opened a gallery in Berlin in 1918, where he promoted German contemporary art in preference to foreign and French art. His stance earned him popularity among right-wing politicians. From 1933 onwards he fostered close contacts with individual Nazi functionaries both as a supporter of the National Socialist artists' group "Der Norden" (The North) and as a member of the Militant League for German Culture. From 1938 to 1941, Moeller received some 700 artworks from the "degenerate art" holdings of the state. Violating regulations, Moeller sold the pieces to German collectors too. In 1943 he moved his gallery to Neuruppin and in 1951 he opened a new gallery in Cologne, which was closed down after his death in 1956.

Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895–1956) got wind of the fact that the works of art seized by the Nazis were to be sold internationally for hard currency in the fall of 1938. He therefore offered his services as an art dealer to the Reich Ministry of Propaganda. Gurlitt signed several contracts with the Reich Ministry of Propaganda over a period of two-and-a-half years. According to information currently available, he received 3,879 works to trade from the confiscated objects, among them 78 paintings, 278 watercolors, 52 drawings, and 3,471 prints. He therefore traded a larger number of artworks than his colleagues Ferdinand Moeller, Karl Buchholz, and Bernhard A. Böhmer.

Karl Buchholz (1901–1992) established a bookshop with a gallery in Berlin in 1925. With the help of his business partner Curt Valentin, who as a Jew was forced to emigrate and subsequently set up a branch in New York, Buchholz was able to sell countless artworks to museums in the United States. Thanks to Buchholz, 644 "degenerate artworks" found their way to New York. Still during the Second World War he was able to open further branches in Bucharest, Lisbon, and Madrid. After the war ended, having emigrated to Colombia, he continued dealing in art while there. It has remained impossible to trace the whereabouts of many of the artworks that Buchholz hid in Germany or sent to other parts of the world.

6 Modern Masters Sold at Auction

On June 30, 1939, the Fischer Gallery in Lucerne held an auction at the request of the Reich Ministry of Propaganda for 125 artworks from the “degenerate art” holdings. In the spring of 1939, the announcement of the pending auction of “Paintings and Sculptures by Modern Masters from German Museums” raised much controversy. Art critic Paul Westheim, in French exile, called for a boycott of the auction because it would only supply the German Reich with hard currency for spending on armaments. Georg Schmidt, museum director in Basle, disagreed and took a stand for the purchase of the pictures that were outlawed in Germany.

Prominent paintings by Georges Braque, Paul Gauguin, as well as Vincent van Gogh’s “Self-Portrait” (1888) came under the hammer. Twenty-five paintings and sculptures landed in museums in Belgium and Switzerland. But the art did not fetch the prices that the German Reich had hoped for. A third of the artworks did not find any buyers.

In the post-auction sale, Hildebrand Gurlitt purchased four paintings from Fischer Gallery. Among them was Otto Mueller’s “Portrait of Maschka Mueller” (before 1925), which had been seized from the Walraff-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. This work has now landed at the Kunstmuseum Bern as part of the legacy of his son Cornelius.

Switzerland played an important role in the trade of “degenerate art.” Hundreds of artworks that were confiscated by the German state found new owners via private sales. Switzerland presented various advantages as a location for art trade of this kind. It was close to Germany geographically and the lenient import requirements made transportation over the borders easy. Also Switzerland’s political neutrality during the Second World War made it an attractive hub for trade.

Purchase by the Kunstmuseum Bern

At the Fischer Gallery auction of “Paintings and Sculptures of Modern Masters from German Museums,” the Kunstmuseum Bern purchased

Louis Corinth's "Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat" (1923) thanks to a supplementary credit from the Swiss government amounting to 6,300 Swiss francs. Today there are other works too in the Kunstmuseum Bern's collection that came under the hammer in 1939 at the Fischer Gallery auction. For example, the collectors Hermann und Margrit Rupf purchased August Macke's painting "Restaurant Garden" (1912); their collection, now the Hermann and Margrit Rupf Foundation, is today a permanent part of the Kunstmuseum Bern.

7 Looted Art in France

After France capitulated on June 30, 1940, Adolf Hitler issued an order for the seizure of art owned by the French state and in private collections. Various government institutions competed with one another in the confiscation of artworks and other cultural property – with the Rosenberg Task Force (ERR) and the Künsberg Special Operations Unit leading the way. At the behest of Hitler and Goering, German art dealers sounded out the situation of the French art market.

French art dealers who were Jews were forced to hand over the management of their galleries to “Arian” administrators from October 1940 on, which amounted to no less than expropriation. The Paris art market flourished during German occupation nevertheless. German art dealers were not affected by the export ban placed on the French government for cultural goods. In France they purchased works for German museums and for international art collectors or sold them to art dealers abroad. From 1939 to 1944, Nazi organizations plundered museums, private collections, archives, and libraries in the territories under German occupation. The looted works of art were put aside for the collections of the planned “Führer Museum” in Linz on the Danube and for the private collections of Nazi functionaries, for Hermann Goering’s in particular. Other works were offered for sale on the international art market, especially via Switzerland, in order to acquire hard currency.

The Plunder of Jewish Collections

Art-historically outstanding collections of Jewish families, such as those of the Rothschilds, the Bernheim-Jeunes, the Kanns, the David-Weills, and the Schlosses, were all plundered during the German occupation of France. Many Jewish collectors fled before the German invasion and had to leave the art they owned behind. From July to September 1940, the German embassy in Paris placed the collections of the French museums under the control of the occupying power and confiscated artworks belonging to Jews. From November on, the Rosenberg

Task Force systematically searched through the galleries belonging to Jews, their apartments and homes, their art depots, and their belongings in bank vaults.

Special Mission Linz

Owing to the order issued by Adolf Hitler on November 18, 1940, all the confiscated artworks from Jewish owners were to be at the disposal of the planned “Führer Museum” of fine art in Linz on the Danube. Since mid-1939, the task force for the so-called “Special Mission Linz” was busy accruing the collection for the future museum. Gurlitt, who in 1941 expanded his business activities to also include the territories occupied by the Germans in Western Europe, was given the commission in the spring of 1943 to purchase works in France for the “Führer Museum.” Until 1944 he negotiated the acquisition of paintings, sculptures, drawings, and tapestries for the “Special Mission” and plumbed the French art market for the German museums.

Most of the accessions for the museum, which was ultimately never realized, were stored from 1944 onwards in the old Altaussee salt mine. The “Gurlitt art trove,” as it is today, still contains works that have a French provenance.

8 Restitution of Looted Art

In 1945, the United States, French, English, and Soviet Allies were confronted by the unbelievable dimensions of Nazi art looting. The men working in the unit for the protection of art and cultural goods, the Monuments Men, recovered hundreds of thousands of artworks and brought them to the Central Collecting Points. These were situated in Munich, Wiesbaden, and Marburg. The items were then listed in inventories and their provenance was checked. Subsequently they were returned to the countries that they originally came from when they were confiscated by the Nazis. The American military government issued Law no. 59 on November 10, 1947, which regulated the return of property that had been seized on racist, religious, and political grounds in the Western Allied zones of occupation.

Art looting was considered a war crime at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. In France legal proceedings were also carried out against German and French art dealers in conjunction with the trials concerning collaboration. Swiss art dealers and collectors were summoned before the court in Bern in 1948.

But what was the legal situation in those cases where the Nazis confiscated artworks from German museums as “degenerate” and then sold them? In 1945, the Allied Control Council decided that the “Law on the Confiscation of Products of Degenerate Art” issued on May 31, 1938, should not be repealed retroactively. Therefore the changes of ownership as a consequence of government confiscations are legal even today.

However, artworks seized from those who were persecuted by the Nazis are considered to be looted art. Works of art that were not acquired legally in this way can still be found in European museums and states. And still today artworks are being restituted to their rightful owners.

Seized: The Gurlitt Collection

By cleverly distributing his art holdings over various locations, Hildebrand Gurlitt was able to safeguard large parts of his collection from the

impact of the war. In March 1945 after the bombing of Dresden, he fled with his family to Aschbach in Upper Franconia. There a unit from the United States army of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Program – the so-called Monuments Men – seized artworks suspected of being stolen. They included paintings and drawings that Gurlitt had purchased on the French art market. These and other suspect pieces remained at the Central Collecting Point in Wiesbaden until 1950 as the “Gurlitt Collection.” At this location the provenance and acquisition circumstances of the artworks were investigated. Gurlitt was interrogated in respect to his activities as an art dealer during the Third Reich by officers working for the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Program. Even though he often came under pressure because he failed to offer an explanation, he was exonerated from all allegations in the fall of 1947. Today it can be verified that he lied about important details. With only a few exceptions the artworks were returned to him.

Collecting Point Bern

The Western Allies pressured the Swiss Federal Council to make mandatory the restitution of looted items from the former Nazi-occupied territories that had found their way to Switzerland. The decree came into effect on December 10, 1945. Douglas Cooper was Britain’s chief investigator of looted art. He played a key role in tracing Nazi-era looted art. To his efforts we owe the disclosure of the collaboration of French art dealers and Swiss collectors along with German art specialists in trading with “degenerate” and Nazi looted art. The Kunstmuseum Bern was a collecting point for seventy-seven paintings and drawings that were classified by the Allied powers as looted art. The courts ruled that the items be restituted to their original and rightful owners. Some of the pieces were also artworks that art dealers had sold to private collectors.

9 The Term “Classical Modernism”

After 1945, the victorious Western Allied Powers organized re-education programs for the zones they occupied in Germany. These programs sought to firmly establish democratic values through confrontation with the crimes against humanity of the Nazi regime. Cultural activities were among the measures they adopted.

The Allied Powers of France and the United States proactively engaged in reopening the museums and promoting modern art, propagating it as an expression of liberty and democracy.

The year 1955 marked a special cultural watershed. The first Documenta in Kassel took place and targeted a comprehensive presentation of the avant-garde that was ostracized under Nazi rule. Central to their objectives was introducing modern art to the general public. In the entrance area modernist works were juxtaposed with a series of photographs of artworks from classical antiquity, early Christianity, and non-European art from all over the world. In this way Documenta I argued the case for a timeless “classicism” in art.

With the rehabilitation of modern art in the Federal Republic of Germany a special term emerged. It first made its appearance in the art dealing scene. In German-speaking European countries the term “classical modernism” became established usage, whereas the remaining European nations used the term “modern art.” The addition of “classical” was to qualify its worth and mask the belated reception owing to Nazi persecution and ostracization.

Legislation after 1945

In 1945, the Western Allies failed to rescind the 1938 Law on the Confiscation of Products of Degenerate Art. Although the German museums suffered considerable losses through the “degenerate art” campaign, in the immediate post-war years it became generally accepted that the confiscation law remained in effect: the state as owner could dispose of its property at will. The sale of works that had been seized from Ger-

man museums was legal in contrast to art items confiscated from private owners, which had to be restituted.

Hildebrand Gurlitt at the Kunstverein Düsseldorf

From 1948 until he died in 1956, Hildebrand Gurlitt was the director of the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen (Art Association for the Rhineland and Westphalia) in Düsseldorf. By mounting exhibitions of German expressionists he carried on where he left off in the 1920s in regard to artistic priorities. The presentation of Marc Chagall's work was met with an overwhelming response; it was the first in the Federal Republic of Germany. Just as he had done during his employment in Zwickau and Hamburg, Gurlitt organized on regular basis lectures and readings. And with studio evenings he sought to foster contacts between artists, museum professionals, and the public. Events such as these made the Kunstverein a cultural meeting point.

"You see, ladies and gentlemen, I experienced two great things in my life. One was expressionism, which I grew up with [...] and the other was French painting, which I only discovered later. The result of these encounters is a collection of modern watercolors, shall we say, from Barlach to Klee and Kandinsky."

Hildebrand Gurlitt, 1956

Luzern 1953

In 1953, the Kunstmuseum Luzern mounted the exhibition "German Art – Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century" („Deutsche Kunst – Meisterwerke des 20. Jahrhunderts“) under the auspices of the first Federal President of West Germany, Theodor Heuss. Hildebrand Gurlitt was a member of the honorary committee and enhanced the presentation with twenty-four artworks from his own collection. Additional loans were made by Ferdinand Moeller, who like Gurlitt, had traded with artworks that had

been confiscated from German museums. In the introduction of the catalogue that was published in conjunction with the exhibition, Heuss pointed out the far-reaching consequences of the role that the city of Lucerne played in the war: "It was here that, in 1939, those artworks executed by Germans, which the dictator Hitler in his depraved introversion branded as 'degenerate art,' were auctioned all over the world." Thus a distinct hallmark of the Lucerne exhibition was the rehabilitation of modern art after it being formerly ostracized and oppressed.

“Gurlitt Art Trove”

September 2010

The Bavarian Public Prosecutor's Office started an investigation against Cornelius Gurlitt on suspicion of tax evasion following a customs inspection on the train from Zurich to Munich.

February/March 2012

Cornelius Gurlitt's Munich apartment was searched and the artworks discovered in it confiscated.

November 3, 2013

A report in the news magazine “Focus” made the “Schwabing Art Trove” public. Many of the works were believed to be Nazi plunder. It turned out that the information on the size and value of the cache of artworks was greatly exaggerated.

November 2013

The Federal Republic of Germany and the Free State of Bavaria set up the “Schwabing Art Trove Taskforce.” This international team of specialists began with the research on the provenances of the artworks. In the following weeks the works confiscated from Gurlitt were published in the database www.lostart.de.

February 2014

Cornelius Gurlitt was represented by a court-appointed custodian and a team of lawyers. His legal representatives announced that further artworks had been found in Gurlitt's house in Salzburg.

April 2014

Cornelius Gurlitt signed an agreement with the Free State of Bavaria and the Federal Republic of Germany on the further procedures to be taken in regard to the art trove. In it he agreed to have the provenance of the artworks investigated by the “Schwabing Art Trove Taskforce” and gave his consent to returning the works that proved to be Nazi-looted art to the descendents of the rightful owners.

May 6, 2014

Cornelius Gurlitt died aged 81 years in Munich. On the following day, on May 7, 2014, the Kunstmuseum Bern Foundation was informed that Hildebrandt Gurlitt had appointed it as his sole beneficiary in his last will and testament.

November 21, 2014

Ms. Ute Werner, Cornelius Gurlitt’s cousin, contested the will.

November 24, 2014

The Kunstmuseum Bern decided to accept the legacy after seven months of consideration.

March/April 2015

The Probate Court in Munich decided that Cornelius Gurlitt’s last will and testament was valid. Ute Werner filed a complaint on behalf of part of the family.

May 2015

Two works in the legacy could be restituted to their rightful owners: Max Liebermann’s painting Two Riders on the Beach was returned to the descendents of David Friedmann. Henri Matisse’s painting Odalisque was restituted to the descendents of Paul Rosenberg.

January 14, 2016

The “Schwabing Art Trove Taskforce” submitted its final report. Subsequently the investigation of ownership and origins of the artworks was taken over by the project “Gurlitt Provenance Research” of the German Center for Lost Cultural Property.

December 15, 2016

The Higher Regional Court in Munich rejected Ute Werner’s appeal against the decision of the Probate Court in Munich and acknowledged the Kunstmuseum Bern as the legal beneficiary. With this decision the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn could intensify their preparations for the planned exhibitions.

February 20, 2017

Adolph von Menzel’s drawing “Interior of a Gothic Church” was returned to the descendents of Elsa Helene Cohen.

May 2017

Camille Pissarro’s painting “La Seine, vue du Pont-Neuf, au fond le Louvre” was restituted to the heirs of Max Heilbronn.

Since November 2017

The Kunstmuseum Bern and the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn are showcasing the works from the Cornelius Gurlitt legacy for the very first time to enable the public to have access to the works and learn about the history of the people involved.

Exhibition

Duration of the exhibition	02.11.17–04.03.18
Entrance fee	CHF 10.00 /red. CHF 7.00
Opening hours	Monday: closed Tuesday: 10:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m. Wednesday–Sunday: 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.
Public holidays	December 24/26/31, 2017, January 1/2, 2018: open 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. December 25, 2017: closed
Private guided tours/ schools	T +41 31 328 09 11 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch
Curators	Nikola Doll, Matthias Frehner, Georg Kreis und Nina Zimmer

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