

Lesson Plan

Degenerate Art

OVERVIEW

Students will learn about the Nazi regime's infamous exhibition called 'Degenerate Art' in 1937. They will develop an understanding of how people and groups consider aesthetics and visual language to express ideas and how this influenced the Nazis' virulent campaign against Modern Art through examining quotes about art as well as artworks from that time period. Lastly, they will consider their own values and ideas and think about how they can create a work of art that expresses them.

Learning Objective: Students will understand how art became a symbol for Nazi ideology and how artistic styles can convey ideas and values.

Essential Questions: Why did the Nazis decide that certain kinds of art were 'degenerate'? How can art work be used to convey values that are economic, social, political, and cultural?

Materials and Sources: This lesson uses the following texts and materials. **Access Google Documents in [this Google Folder](#).**

- **Video:** [Degenerate Art Exhibit](#)
- **Sources:** [Art Interpretation Quotes and Image Analysis](#)
- **Student Handout:** [Art Project Planning Sheet](#)

Content Knowledge: Understanding modern art, how people interpret it and how art works can reflect values and points of view. Understanding how political movements can adopt a visual language or "aesthetic."

Skills Development: Analyzing quotations to understand perspective, visual thinking strategies and analysis.

PROCEDURE

- To introduce students to the 'Degenerate Art' Exhibit, you can have them read [this press release](#) and watch [this short video](#), or you can use one of the overview articles or videos listed below under **More Resources**.
- Give students access to the **Sources:** [Art Interpretation Quotes and Image Analysis](#). Students may struggle with the question 'What does the speaker think art SHOULD be or look like?' It may be useful to introduce the vocabulary words *aesthetic* (principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art) and *visual language* (a system of communication that uses visual elements—such as symbols, color, photography, and typography). You can help students to understand these ideas by telling them to think of an aesthetic as how something looks and a visual language as why it looks that way.
 - Guide students through interpreting the three quotes from the Degenerate Art Guidebook and the artists Pablo Picasso and George Grosz. You can employ an "I do, We do, You do" model or have them work on their own or in pairs.
 - Next, using the images provided, guide students through the following questions:
 - What's going on in this picture?

- What do you see that makes you say that?
 - What point of view does this express about what art should (or shouldn't) look like or represent?
- Before moving on, you may want to explain to students that the Nazis adopted an aesthetic that was rooted in classicism because they connected that to eugenics, antisemitism, and the strict racist hierarchy that they endorsed. You can further explain that the idea of 'Degenerate Art' was a counterpoint to the Nazi aesthetic in that the works that they put in that exhibit were modern and abstract (not classical), and sometimes showed images of disabled or "non-Aryan" people, and frequently played with color, shape and form.
- As a culminating activity, students should brainstorm a point of view for their own art work. The teacher can decide to have students model their work after a specific 'degenerate' artist or style, or they can encourage students to think in terms of aesthetic or visual language, or use the simpler organization provided in the Art Project Planning Sheet. Teachers should tailor this part of the lesson to work with whatever supplies and resources are at their disposal.

Extension and Differentiation: Teachers can also have students research or write about an art movement that was labelled as 'degenerate' such as Cubism, Fauvism, Abstract Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, etc.

More Resources: Students may benefit from [this reading overview](#) or [this video analysis](#) of the Degenerate Art Exhibit on [facinghistory.org](#). Additionally, [this lesson plan](#) from Yad Vashem, entitled Propaganda and the Visual Arts in the Third Reich, guides students through analyzing a political cartoon related to the Nazi war on Modern Art. For a more academic interpretation of the Degenerate Art show, you can read [Diagnostic Malpractice: The Nazis on Modern Art. By Donald Kuspit](#) in *Art Forum* or [The Disturbing Lessons of the 1937 'Degenerate Art' Show](#) from artnet.com. You can read more about [Picasso's interpretations of his art](#) and [George Grosz's autobiography](#). You can access a [transcript of the "Guide to the "Degenerate Art" Exhibition \(1937\)"](#).

Key words: modern art, abstract art, Cubism, Dadaism, Propaganda, Picasso, Grosz,

STANDARDS:

Louisiana State Social Studies Standards:

LA 8.14 Describe the causes, course, and consequences of World War II.

LA US 15.k k. Analyze the Holocaust, including the suspension of basic civil rights by the Third Reich, concentration camp system, antisemitism, persecution of Jews and non-Jews, Jewish and non-Jewish resistance, the role played by the United States in liberating Nazi concentration camps, immigration of Holocaust survivors, and the Nuremberg trials.

National Standards for History; Content Era 8, Standard 3A The student understands the international background of World War II.

Louisiana State Arts Standards:

VA-AP-M2 Recognize that concepts of beauty differ by culture and that taste varies from person to person (1, 4, 5)

VA-AP-M5 Discuss the question "What is art?" and express intuitive reactions and personal responses to various works (1, 4)

VA-AP-H1 Use advanced art/design vocabulary for responding to the aesthetic qualities of various works (1, 4)

VA-AP-H2 Distinguish unique characteristics of art as it reflects concepts of beauty and quality of life in various cultures (1, 4, 5)

VA-AP-H5 Question/weigh evidence and information, examine intuitive reactions, and articulate personal attitudes toward visual works (1, 2, 5)

VA-AP-H6 Integrate knowledge of the visual arts in the total environment to understand the arts within a community