

The Inclusion of Art in a Study of the Holocaust

The following discussion references slides in "The Holocaust," a PowerPoint by the Birmingham Holocaust Education Committee, but can be used to study all Holocaust art.

A work of art can be a powerful, thought-provoking tool for educators faced with the challenge of bringing Holocaust history to the classroom. Unlike the printed text, which unfolds over time, pictorial art can speak volumes at a glance, stimulating students to explore and respond to the variety of perspectives critical to an understanding of Holocaust history. For this reason, teachers should seriously consider the inclusion of art in their lessons and units on the Holocaust.

Four categories of Holocaust-period art will be examined:

1. **Nazi Art** – posters and illustrated books for children which reveal the Nazi racist ideology.
2. **Art "From the Outside"** – political cartoons as a means of investigating world responses to events occurring within Nazi Germany and Europe.
3. **Victim Art** – documents the Holocaust from the viewpoint of those who suffered under Nazi persecution
4. **Aftermath Art: Art as Memory** – explores the legacy of the Holocaust as interpreted by artists (survivors and others) working in the postwar period.

It is imperative that artistic works be placed in their historical context. A piece of Nazi propaganda art could potentially convey the same hateful message it had originally transmitted the German citizenry. The biases of a political cartoon published 50 or 60 years ago may be misunderstood without an explanation. Victim art, created without approval of the Nazis, was done so under extreme personal danger while Art as Memory opens emotional wounds without the fear of physical harm.

Nazi Art

It is important to keep students mindful of the manipulative nature of this art, and to assure that Nazi racist stereotypes are not perpetuated, however unintentionally.

An artist in Hitler's Germany needed first and foremost to be an ethnic German to win the Nazi government's stamp of approval. After that, acceptable painting or sculpture included those that conformed to the tastes of the German dictator. Hitler, himself a failed artist who blamed his lack of success on what he conceived to be the "liberal" artistic establishment, strongly opposed modernist tendencies in art (*see slide #20, Hitler's Art*). He disliked the expressionist style of artists such as Paul Klee and Max Beckmann, who were influential in Germany during the 1920's. Instead, he preferred straightforward, representational portraits and scenes drawn from nature.

Art unacceptable to the German authorities was deemed "degenerate," "Bolshevik," or "Jewish." In 1937, Nazi officials purged German museums of works the Party considered to be degenerate. From the thousands of works removed, 650 were chosen for a special exhibit of *Entartete Kunst*. The exhibit opened in Munich and then traveled to eleven other cities in Germany and Austria. In each installation, the works were poorly hung and surrounded by graffiti and hand written labels mocking the artists and their creations. Over three million visitors attended making it the first "blockbuster" exhibition. This exhibit represented the end for artists such as Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky (*see slide # 221, art of Marc Chagall*).

For more information see, <http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/artDegen.htm>.

It is possible to teach a mini-lesson about Holocaust history based on the experiences of an individual artist whose works were deemed “degenerate.” Students should begin with an examination of the artist’s world prior to Hitler’s takeover in Germany, then analyze how that world changed.

Propaganda Art

The Nazi press, controlled by Joseph Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda, published and distributed many books that featured ludicrously stereotyped depictions of Jews. These styles were employed to incite hatred and disgust on the part of ordinary Germans toward their Jewish fellow citizens, whose presence in the Third Reich suddenly constituted an “alien menace.”

Slide # 39: Antisemitic political cartoon, "Rothschild" by the French caricaturist, C. Leandre, 1898.

Slide # 80: Political Cartoon from *Der Stürmer* entitled, “Away with Him.”

Slide # 101: Children’s Book, *The Poisonous Mushroom (Der Giftpilz)*.

Slide # 108: Movie Posters for *The Eternal Jew* and *Jew Pests (Jud Süß)*.

Ask students to describe what they see in the pictures. What is the message that is being conveyed? Who is the intended audience?

Propaganda Art was also used to glorify the regime, “selling” their political message. Comparisons may be made between the Nazi’s use of vivid graphics and pithy slogans to promote their ideology and the techniques of modern commercial advertising. How do they differ?

Slide # 49: Nazi propaganda poster.

Slide # 50: “Work and Bread!” Nazi Party election poster.

Slide # 60: "One People, One Empire, One Führer."

Slide # 93: Hitler Youth Posters.

Slide # 107: "All Germany hears the Führer on the People's Receiver."

Slide # 109: Media Posters.

Art from the Outside

World reaction to Hitler’s regime was frequently communicated through the lively medium of the political or editorial cartoon, of which thousands were printed in newspapers and journals during the years 1933 to 1945. Such art serves to deflate the rhetoric and stereotypes promoted by the Nazis. While some of these cartoons attack Nazi German tactics, other take aim at the physical appearance of major figures in the Nazi party.

Slide # 58: Political Cartoon by David Low, “Night of the Long Knives,” July 3, 1934.

Slide # 63: “Second Creation” by Theodor Seuss Geisel, April 3, 1942.

Slide # 131: “Will the Evian Conference Guide Him to Freedom”, July 3, 1938.

Slide # 149: “Next,” Invasion of Poland, 1939.

Slide # 198: “Occupied Paris” by Arthur Szyk, 1940

Slide # 204: “The Painter and the Clipper,” 1940, Arthur Szyk

Slide # 207: “A. Hitler, Taxidermist,” by Theodor Seuss Geisel, June 25, 1941.

Slide # 324: “How are we feeling today?” 1945 British cartoon

- Slide # 364: "Put your finger here, pal...", Theodor Seuss Geisel, December 16, 1942.
 Slide # 366: "Our Warm, Warm Cot" Theodor Seuss Geisel, February 24, 1942.
 Slide # 368: "Stop Wringing the Hands...", Theodor Seuss Geisel, September 25, 1941.
 Slide # 370: "We Always Were Suckers for Ridiculous Hats,"
 Theodor Seuss Geisel, April 29, 1941.
 Slide # 372: "The Alibi Boys," Theodor Seuss Geisel, July 14, 1942.
 Slide # 374: "...and the Wolf chewed up the children...", Theodor Seuss Geisel, October 1, 1941.

Victim Art

Classroom teachers rarely have time to offer an in-depth survey of the Holocaust period. Instead, they tend to focus on a few events, such as Hitler's rise to power, the adoption of anti-Jewish legislation in Germany, and the establishment of the concentration camps. Although this framework may provide an adequate overview of Holocaust history, students feel more "connected" to the subject when given details about the lives of individuals who were persecuted by the German State. One way of providing that connection is to introduce and discuss works of art created by these victims of Nazism.

Victims were not allowed to possess cameras, paintbrushes, or sketchpads, in part because these were the tools by which the outside world might learn of Germany's crimes against humanity. Yet, many victims managed to secretly create a durable record of their experiences. They smuggled supplies past ghetto watchmen and traded precious food rations for access to art supplies. Some even fashioned their own materials.

Most of these examples contained in the PowerPoint were done by victims after the war. For that reason they are listed as both "Victim Art" as well as "Art as Memory."

- Slide # 190: "The Ghetto" by Samuel Bak.
 Slide # 200 "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" by Karl Schwesig.
 Slide # 227: "Im Wagon" (In the Railway Car) by Ella Liebermann-Shiber.
 Slide # 249: "Unable to Work" by David Olère.
 Slide # 259: "Appell (roll call)" by Jan Kowski.
 Slide # 261: "The Food of the Dead for the Living" by David Olère.
 Slide # 262: "Soup Distribution," "Hunger - Looking for Food," "Hunger - Stealing Bread"
 by Ella Liebermann-Shiber.
 Slide # 266: "Nazi Brutality" by Zinovi Tolkachev.
 Slide # 275: "Gassings" by David Olère.
 Slide # 288: "In Memory of the Czech Transport to the Gas Chambers" by Yehuda Bacon.
 Slide # 310: "Invasion of Normandy" by Simon Jeruchim.
 Slide # 315: "Death March" by Ella Liebermann Shiber.

Aftermath Art: Art as Memory

Among victim artists who survived, several continued through the postwar years to bear witness by means of their creative endeavors. Such works fall into this final category of “Aftermath Art.” In addition, this category also includes those works created by artists with no direct experience with the Holocaust. Some, such as artists Becky Seitel and Mitzi Levin who created the exhibit “Darkness into Life,” were emotionally drawn to the subject of the Holocaust in order to preserve the stories of Birmingham survivors.

- Slide # 141: “Palestine Restricted,” 1944, Arthur Szyk.
- Slide # 162: “Polish Exiles,” 1941, Arthur Szyk.
- Slide # 163: “Untitled (The Jewish Star),” Arthur Szyk, 1940.
- Slide # 190: “The Ghetto” by Samual Bak.
- Slide # 200 “Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite” by Karl Schwesig.
- Slide # 227: “Im Wagon” (In the Railway Car) by Ella Liebermann-Shiber.
- Slide # 249: “Unable to Work” by David Olère.
- Slide # 259: “Appell (roll call)” by Jan Komski.
- Slide # 261: “The Food of the Dead for the Living” by David Olère.
- Slide # 262: “Soup Distribution,” “Hunger - Looking for Food,” “Hunger – Stealing Bread” by Ella Liebermann-Shiber.
- Slide # 266: “Nazi Brutality” by Zinovi Tolkachev.
- Slide # 275: “Gassings” by David Olère.
- Slide # 288: “In Memory of the Czech Transport to the Gas Chambers” by Yehuda Bacon.
- Slide # 302: “Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto” by Arthur Szyk.
- Slide # 310: “Invasion of Normandy” by Simon Jeruchim.
- Slide # 315: “Death March” by Ella Liebermann Shiber.

Many educators encourage students to respond to their study of the Holocaust by creating their own works of Aftermath Art. This exercise, which should be assigned at the end of the unit of study, can be an illuminating activity. For students, fashioning a meaningful work of art means confronting and synthesizing all the information – and all the emotions – they have accumulated during their course of study.