

Emil Nolde: Degenerate Artist



I N 1937, two shows were mounted in Munich in buildings near one another. One show was called Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) and the other the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition). The purpose, according to Adolf Hitler, was to display "the disgusting and revolting lunacies of incompetents and charlatans in contrast to the healthy joyousness of pure German art." Works by Kirchner, Chagall, Kadinsky, and many others were in Entartete Kunst, as were 27 paintings, watercolors, and prints by Emil Nolde. Five of the images in this show are the same as Nolde's prints in that exhibition.

Emil Nolde was one of the most important artists of Expressionism, one of the avant garde movements labeled "degenerate" by the Nazis. They hated the primitive, ecstatic, and erotic subject matter. They derided the distortions of form and color and non-naturalistic imagery, preferring the empty neoclassicism and glorification of healthy bodies and happy families in the other exhibition. Ironically, the public agreed with posterity, since many more people attended the Entartete Kunst exhibit than the other.

In their drive to expunge all evidence of this decay from the public's mind, the Nazis burned books and removed art works from museums all over Germany. Over a thousand of Nolde's works were confiscated.

Who was this man whose works so offended the Nazis? Emil Nolde was born Emil Hanson in the town of Nolde on the Danish-German border in 1867 to a moderately prosperous farm family. Early on, he worked in a furniture factory and was a part-

time art student. He later devoted himself solely to art, studying in Paris and Munich, where he was influenced by the work of Van Gogh and Edvard Munch, who became his friend.

In 1902 he married Ada Vilstrup, the subject of many of his watercolors, oils, and prints. They were devoted to each other and, although she suffered from chronic ill health, his art work became the children she couldn't have.

He took as his subject matter religion, fantasy, dance, mothers and children, and the rural land and seascapes of northern Germany where he grew up. During a brief sojourn in Hamburg, he painted and made prints of the harbor, and when he stayed in Berlin became fascinated with the life of theaters and cabarets, which he also portrayed.

In 1906 he joined Die Brücke (The Bridge), a group of artists that included Kirchner, Heckel, and Schmidt Rottluff. These Expressionists, influenced by Nietzsche just as Nolde was, appealed to his desire to depict the inner life, but he left them after a year, feeling that his independence was compromised.

In 1911 he was expelled from the Berlin Secession, a group of artists strongly influenced by the French Impressionists. He complained bitterly about the undue influence of French artists on what he felt should be German art. He said that his art was the genuine expression of Germanic spirituality and essence, harking back to the traditions of Grünewald and Dürer. He felt that the elevation of instinct over reason in his work was an echo of early German art.

His belief in the essential Germanism of his work led him to affiliate himself with the Danish Nazi party, because he sympathized with their ideas about race and homeland. He wrote in his biography that "Art is superior to religion and to race." In fact, art was a religion to him.

For this reason, he was aghast when he was accused of being one of the prime exemplars of "degeneracy." In spite of his attempts to refute the charges, he continued to be singled out. By 1941, an order was given that he was not to paint or sell his work, and he was under constant surveillance by the Gestapo to see that he did not do so.

From then until the end of the war he secretly painted over 1,500 small watercolors that could escape detection. After the war, he turned many of the watercolors he called "unpainted pictures" into oils. He died in 1956.

Much of his artistic fame comes from his skill as a colorist, in both oils and watercolor. His contribution to printmaking, however, was significant. He stopped making prints in 1937, because he said that the stark contrast of black and white was affecting his vision. His color lithographs have a watercolor quality to them, and his experiments with engraving, particularly the engravings he made in Hamburg in 1910, showed a painterly manner of varying tone and intensity.

As a psychoanalyst, I originally became interested in the art of the Expressionists because I thought they were attempting to express the inner life and emotions in their art. They worked at the turn of the 20th century, a time of artistic and intellectual ferment and, not coincidentally, the time when Freud's work was developing. I soon became interested in Nolde specifically both because I considered him a great artist and printmaker and because he remained committed to his artistic beliefs despite pressure by people who he thought believed as he did. Many of his compatriots, like Beckmann, left the country; some, like Kirchner, committed suicide; others, like Heckel, changed their manner of expression. He did not. He remained true to his vision.

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Catalog of the Exhibition



All numbers are from *Emil Nolde: Das Graphische Werk* von Gustav Schieffler und Christel Mosel [*Emil Nolde: The Graphic Work* compiled and edited by Gustav Schieffler and Christel Mosel].

1. Junger Fürst und Tänzerinnen 1918 (Entartete Kunst)
Young Prince and Dancers
Etching and tonal etching. Volume I #196. 26.0 x 22.0 cm
2. Tänzerin (Klein) 1911
Dancer (small)
Lithograph. Volume II #36. 15.0 x 10.7 cm
3. Lebensfreude 1905
Joy of Life
Etching and dry point. Volume I #11. 18.0 x 12.0 cm
4. Kerzentänzerin 1918
Candle Dancer
Etching and tonal etching. Volume I #195. 26.0 x 22.0 cm
5. Der Tod als Tänzerin 1918
Death as a Dancer
Etching and tonal etching. Volume I #200. 21.0 x 26.0 cm
6. Waldkinder 1911
Wood Sprites
Dry point, punch work, tonal etching. Volume I #161.
25.0 x 30.0 cm
7. Mann und Weibchen 1912 (Entartete Kunst)
Man and Woman
Woodcut. Volume II #111. 24.4 x 30.0 cm