

Historical Context: The Persecution of Jewish Visual Artists under National Socialism

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The Nazi era (1933-1945) was marked by the systematic persecution of Jews in all areas of life, including the arts. Jews active in all branches of the arts, including visual, performing and literary arts, were targeted by racial policies that sought to erase their contributions from cultural history. Jewish visual artists – such as painters, sculptors, ceramists, and illustrators-faced censorship, professional bans, exile, and all too often, imprisonment and murder in concentration camps. The persecution of Jewish artists in Germany began with the Nazi takeover of power in 1933, part of a broader antisemitic ideology that aimed to eliminate Jewish influence from public life. This included the cultural sphere, which was tightly controlled by the Nazi government to conform to the so-called national spirit.

One of the first steps of the systematically organized exclusion of Jews from cultural life was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (“Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums“ or BBG), enacted on April 7, 1933. The law formed the legal basis for the Nazis to replace political opponents and Jews in the civil service. Artists employed in public institutions, such as art academies, were dismissed if considered “non-Aryan.” The definition of this term was soon expanded to include anyone of Jewish origin, regardless of their religious affiliations or self-identification.¹

Another key instrument of exclusion was the founding of the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer, RKK) on September 22, 1933, under Joseph Goebbels. Membership in the Reich Chamber of Culture and its subdivision, the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts (“Reichskammer der bildenden Künste,” RdbK) became mandatory for all professional artists. From November 1 of that year, Jews and political dissidents were systematically excluded, effectively ending their careers. The „List of Jews, Jewish Half-breeds, and Persons Married to Jews who were Expelled from the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts since 1933” (“Liste der seit 1933 aus der Reichskammer der bildenden Künste ausgeschlossenen Juden, Jüdischen Mischlingen und mit Juden Verheirateten,” created by the Nazis, is an important piece of perpetrator documentation listing more than 610 Jewish visual artists (except for architects) who were excluded from public life from 1933 on. The registry also included individuals classified in Nazi terminology as “Mischlinge” (people of mixed Jewish and non-Jewish ancestry) and those who were “intermarried.” These excluded and later expelled artists are documented in the JDCRP project on persecuted Jewish artists, with additional sources and biographical details provided when available. For example, the artist [Benedikt F. Dolbin](#) (1883-1971) was able to flee shortly after he was banned from working in 1935 to New York, while another sculptor on this list, [Amalie Seckbach](#) (1870-1944), was deported to Terezin (Theresienstadt) ghetto, where she died. One helpful tool for identifying artists on the list is the so-called [Residentenliste](#), an unpublished database at the Bundesarchiv Berlin. Artists such as [Karl Albu](#) (1877-1945) and [Anna Bergmann](#) (1877-?) were further identified thanks to the above-mentioned source.

¹Osterloh, Jörg. „Ausschaltung der Juden und des jüdischen Geistes“: Nationalsozialistische Kulturpolitik 1920–1945. Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz Bauer Instituts 34. Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2020, p. 302.

The persecution of Jewish artists was also extended to artists' associations. Few such associations resisted Nazi policies, with exceptions such as the Hamburg Secession, which voluntarily disbanded so as not to have to exclude its Jewish members.² [Gretchen Wohlwill](#) (1878-1962), for example, was dismissed as an ordinary member from the Hamburgischen Künstlerschaft from 1933 on.³ Loss of membership meant loss of the right to exhibit, an existential blow for any working artist. This exclusion was reinforced through aggressive art propaganda. Shaming tactics, such as the so-called “degenerate art” exhibitions, were part of the public art programs. The first exhibition using the name “degenerate art” was shown in Dresden in 1933. In 1937, in Munich, a much larger “degenerate art” Munich exhibition further stigmatized modernist and Jewish artists. This exhibition and others were shown in cities throughout Germany. Many works from Jewish artists, such as [Max Liebermann](#) (1847-1935), [Ludwig Meidner](#) (1884-1966), and [Marc Chagall](#) (1887-1985), were removed from museums, confiscated, or destroyed.

The Nuremberg Laws (“Nürnberger Gesetze”) of 1935 deepened discrimination, excluding Jews from the so-called Volksgemeinschaft (“people’s community”) and banning mixed marriages. These laws also impacted cultural institutions, which were either dissolved or restructured into segregated “Jewish Cultural Leagues,” where Jewish artists could perform only for Jewish audiences. In response, some Jewish artists in Germany participated in the Jüdischer Kulturbund, a Nazi-controlled body that gave them limited opportunities to exhibit and work. However, this institution ultimately delayed the decision to emigrate for many, often with tragic consequences. Artists who were active under this umbrella organization and who still exhibited in the Jewish Museum Berlin at the Reichsausstellung jüdischer Künstler in 1936, like [Paula Grünfeld](#) (1885-1943) and [Edith Marcus](#) (1888-1941), were later murdered in the Shoah. Others went into exile, although not all survived (see the biography of [Kurt Löwengard](#) (1895-1940), especially in territories later occupied by the Nazis. The Jüdischer Kulturbund was disbanded by 1941.

Those who remained under Nazi rule were marginalized, living under constant threat to their lives. Some, like [Charlotte Salomon](#) (1917-1943), continued creating art in secrecy. Salomon painted her autobiographical series *Life? or Theatre?* while she was in hiding; she ultimately was deported and murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. [Felix Nussbaum](#) (1904-1944), whose haunting paintings captured the atmosphere of fear under Nazi terror, was killed, together with his wife [Felka Platek](#) (1899-1944), in Auschwitz in 1944. Another example is the little known Paris-based artist, ceramicist, and sculptor [Erna Wolfson-Davidoff \(Erna DEM\)](#) (1889-1942), who was at the height of her career when she was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz. Most of her work is lost today. Others, interned in camps such as Theresienstadt, risked their lives to produce clandestine artworks. Artists like [Bedřich Fritta](#) (1906-1944) and [Leo Haas](#) (1901-1983) documented daily life under brutal conditions. Many of their surviving drawings serve as testimony of their experiences and are housed today at the Ghetto Fighters House Archive in Israel.

This project is dedicated to rescuing the biographies of such individuals from obscurity. While some of these artists are well-known, others are identified publicly for the first time in the JDCRP Registry [Documenting Persecuted Jewish Artists](#). Linked sources serve as starting points for more in-depth research.

²Leppien, Helmut R., Hamburger Kunsthalle, and Ausstellung Ausgegrenzt – Kunst in Hamburg 1933–1945 Hamburg 2005. *Ausgegrenzt: Kunst in Hamburg 1933–1945*; [Katalog zur Ausstellung Ausgegrenzt – Kunst in Hamburg 1933–1945 vom 21. August bis zum 13. November 2005]. Bremen: Hauschild, 2005, p. 6.

³Lorenz, Ina, and Jörg Berkemann. *Die Hamburger Juden im NS-Staat 1933 bis 1938/39. Band 2: Monografie*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016, p. 880.

Terms in the Registry, such as “survived,” represent vastly different fates. Some artists resumed careers after the war; others never recovered from their traumatic experiences, including exile, which often meant living at subsistence levels, with little or no professional recognition. Many emigrated to countries such as France, Palestine, or the United States, attempting to continue their work. A few, like [Jacques Lipchitz](#) (1891-1973), gained further recognition abroad and were able to continue their careers. However, most others, such as [Viktor Tischler](#) (1890-1951), or [Jussuf Abbo](#) (1890-1953), remained obscure, struggling without professional networks. A few artists eventually reestablished their careers, albeit at more local and regional levels. [Curt Singer](#) (1905-1989), for instance, once a highly promising young painter in Hamburg, was long thought to have died by suicide in 1938 in Paris, but in fact fled to Palestine in 1935 and later achieved a modest level of recognition in Israel. His post-exile works remain virtually unknown in Germany.

Art historical research on “Degenerate Art” and the so-called “Lost Generation” (“Verschollene Generation”) has often overlooked Jewish artists who were persecuted under National Socialism. Many of these artists were not targeted because of their artistic style but solely because of their Jewish origin. As a result of this persecution, many disappeared almost entirely from the art historical canon. A clear distinction between Jewish artists persecuted as “degenerate” for their identity and non-Jewish artists labeled “degenerate” for stylistic or political reasons remains largely absent in existing scholarship.

This gap may also be attributed to the complex and often contentious discourse surrounding the concept of “Jewish art,” which is based on differing understandings of the so-called prohibition of images (“Bilderverbot”) in the Torah. Does “Jewish art” or a category of “Jewish artists” truly exist? This question has been widely debated by scholars from various disciplines, with the transnational term undergoing shifts in meaning over time and across national borders. It is a broad and fluid category that has been interpreted and contested in numerous ways.

As Helmut Lenhart notes in his study on Jewish art, “there is no such thing as *das Judentum* (*this Judaism*), but rather a chorus of many.” This diversity is equally reflected in artistic expressions. Another important question is: Who was considered Jewish in this context? The case of the artist [Seligmann Serner](#) (1894-1942) highlights these complexities. Despite converting to Catholicism, he remained classified as a Jewish artist by the National Socialists and was ultimately persecuted and murdered. Establishing a clear connection between the Jewish identity and artistic production of an artist is often difficult. Given these complexities, this Registry includes all artists who were persecuted because of their actual and/or perceived Jewish origin.

Much of the work created by persecuted Jewish artists up to the end of the war was lost, destroyed, looted, or forgotten. While some post-war memorial publications and exhibitions on the artists, such as those in Paris by Hersh Fenster (1951) and in Warsaw by Josef Sandel (1957), sought to bring individual stories back into public memory, their impact was limited by language barriers, particularly the use of Yiddish. Only in 2021 did the Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme Paris translate Hersh Fenster’s important volume into French, once again shedding light on 84 forgotten Jewish artists who had lived and worked in Paris. Many artists who managed to flee were forced to leave all their work behind. Their studios were often destroyed. As a result, many artworks remain missing. Today, numerous art institutions, historians, and descendants are working to recover stolen art and restore these artists to their rightful place in cultural history.

For deeper insight into individual stories, please refer to the four case studies written by Ariela Braunschweig and Dr. Sigalit Meidler-Waks, which highlight the personal and artistic journeys of selected artists documented in the [Registry](#).

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