



# **"Degenerate Art"**

The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany



## **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**

*Robert O. Anderson Building, Plaza Level*

February 17–May 12, 1991

## **The Art Institute of Chicago**

*Regenstein Hall, The Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building*

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Cover: Crowds in Room 3 of the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, Munich, 1937

## "Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany

In 1937 the National Socialists mounted the most virulent campaign ever initiated against modern art with the opening in Munich on July 19 of the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art) exhibition. Six hundred and fifty paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, and books that had until a few weeks before been in the possession of thirty-two German public museum collections were brought together for the purposes of condemnation and defamation.

When the National Socialists had assumed power in 1933, one of their first acts had been an attack on authors, most of them contemporary Germans. Widespread book-burnings, in which thousands of volumes were destroyed in public view, announced the new policy toward the arts. Well-respected artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers, many but not all of whom were Jewish, were soon forced from their jobs; many went into exile. The Nazis' actions against modern art culminated in 1937 with the opening of *Entartete Kunst* as a contrast to the nearby *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German art exhibition), an installation of hundreds of Nazi-approved paintings and sculptures. *Entartete Kunst* contained works by German Expressionists (Beckmann, Dix, Grosz, Kirchner, Kokoschka, Lehbruck, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff); artists who represented the abstract tendencies of the Bauhaus (Feininger, Kandinsky, Klee, Schlemmer); and non-

Germans who had worked in Germany and whose work had been collected by German museums (Chagall, Jawlensky, Lissitzky). The art was crowded into nine rooms of the Archäologisches Institut in Munich. In the seven galleries on the upper floor some attempt was made to group the works by theme, for example, works that treated religious subjects, works by Jewish artists, abstract art, and art that demonstrated African or primitive influences. Slogans and commentary painted on the temporary walls denounced the artists as "incompetents and charlatans" and branded the art with phrases such as "An insult to the German heroes of the Great War" or "Decadence exploited for literary and commercial purposes." Handwritten labels revealed how much had been paid for each work from "the taxes of the German working people."

The exhibition, which represented only a fraction of the more than 16,000 works of art confiscated from German museums in 1937, attracted enormous crowds. Nearly three million people saw it before its thirteen-city German and Austrian tour was completed in 1941. The majority of visitors were unfamiliar with the aims of the avant-garde and were thus easily swayed by the chaotic installation and derogatory slogans.

Much of the art in *Entartete Kunst* was ultimately lost or destroyed, and the identity of the specific works included in

the exhibition could not easily be established. No comprehensive checklist exists; although lengthy confiscation inventories were kept, the art was often mistitled or identified only by the artist's name, and groups of works or portfolios were lumped under a single inventory number. Only a small brochure was published (see the introductory gallery) illustrating fifty works, not all of which were included in the Munich exhibition. It was only through recently discovered installation photographs that the original exhibition could be reconstructed and the process of locating the works begun. *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* is the most complete reassembly of the extant works and the first in America that attempts to recreate the historical context in which the art and the artists were publicly attacked. While concentrating on the visual arts, the exhibition also documents the assault on modern film, literature, and music.



## Entry area and corridor

Words and images of defamed artists

## Introductory gallery

1. Background on the National Socialists' rise to power, art and political posters
2. Scale model of the original *Entartete Kunst* exhibition
3. Information on the support for avant-garde art at museums in Berlin, Essen, Frankfurt, Halle, Hannover, and Mannheim and their collection and exhibition histories before the National Socialist takeover in 1933
4. Vitines containing catalogues, tickets, leaflets, advertising, and other memorabilia related to the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, newspaper clippings about the German art exhibitions of 1937
5. Documentation of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German art exhibition) of Nazi-approved art, catalogues, and documents that laid the foundation for the National Socialist characterization of modern art as "degenerate"
6. *Munich 1937* by Erwin Leiser, newsreel footage of Hitler visiting the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*
7. Information on the Galerie Fischer auction of June 30, 1939, in Lucerne, Switzerland, the most overt manifestation of the Nazis' desire to turn confiscated art into currency—a remarkable sale of 125 paintings and sculptures expropriated from German museum collections

## Film gallery

A thirty-minute tape running continuously presents excerpts from the work of defamed Expressionist filmmakers such as Fritz Lang,

G. W. Pabst, and Josef von Sternberg and of those who made abstract films, such as Oskar and Hans Fischinger.

## Literature gallery

Arranged as a reading room, this gallery contains editions of books on the Nazis' list of banned titles, copies of which were consigned to the flames in the infamous book-burnings of 1933, including John Dos Passos, *Nineteen Nineteen*; Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (The interpretation of dreams); Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*; and Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (All quiet on the western front).

8. *Germany 1933* by Erwin Leiser provides film footage of the 1933 book-burnings.

## Music gallery

Compact disc players with headphones allow visitors to listen to a sampling of music in each of three categories, vitines contain related material.

9. Information on Nazi-approved music by Anton Bruckner, Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner, and others
10. Information on the suppression and persecution of jazz musicians and their listeners
11. Documentation of music defamed by the Nazis, including the work of Ernst Krenck, Arnold Schoenberg, and Kurt Weill

## Works from "Entartete Kunst"

The Nazis attempted to bring iconographic order to the overcrowded *Entartete Kunst* exhibition by grouping some works under room headings designed to emphasize the degeneracy of the art by means of a presumably didactic organizational system. In fact, the headings were the product of a deliberate misrepresentation of the artists' intentions. The groupings have been maintained for this installation, although the chaotic means of display have not been

duplicated. In each room one wall documents the appearance of the corresponding gallery in the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* exhibition.

12. Religious subject matter and art by Jewish artists, originally grouped under the headings, "Insolent mockery of the Divine under Centrist rule" and "Revelation of the Jewish racial soul"
13. Images of women, labeled by the Nazis as "An insult to German womanhood" and "The ideal—cretin and whore"
14. A variety of works condemned in 1937 for their depiction of non-Aryans, particularly primitive peoples
15. Abstract and other avant-garde works, originally accompanied by the slogans, "Madness becomes method" and "Crazy at any price"
16. Never-before-seen silent newsreel footage of *Entartete Kunst* shot by Julien Bryan, an American journalist
17. Still lifes and landscapes deemed by the Nazis to depict "Nature as seen by sick minds"
18. Works from Rooms 6 and 7 on the upper floor of *Entartete Kunst*, including paintings and sculptures by older or deceased artists and faculty members dismissed from the German art academies, as well as paintings and graphic works once crowded into the small ground-floor galleries

## The Design of the Installation

The design of any museum exhibition requires careful planning, but the design for “Degenerate Art”: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* posed a special challenge to its designer, architect Frank O. Gehry. His task was to convey an accurate sense of the oppressiveness of the 1937 installation of *Entartete Kunst* while presenting its once-denigrated works in their proper context. As Gehry put it, “The idea is to let people know not only how maligned this art was, but how beautiful it is. The intention is to show the art for what it is—good art.”

A dialogue was therefore established between “then” and “now,” a dialogue that begins even before visitors enter the exhibition. In the lobby, quotations from artists, writers, and musicians whose works were censored or confiscated by the Nazis are accompanied by photographs of those artists. This arrangement of words and images sets up a sense of foreboding that builds along the corridor that leads from the lobby to the introductory gallery.

There a twenty-two-foot scale model of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition placed at eye level enables the visitor to “walk through” the original exhibition, to see how the 650 works on display were crammed together on the walls and how slogans written on those walls ridiculed the works of art. Photographs of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition are displayed nearby, with catalogues, tickets, and other memorabilia, in heavy wooden cases specially designed by Gehry to evoke a gloomy, institutional look. One section of the room is devoted to an

assessment of the collecting policies of German museums prior to 1933 and their support for avant-garde art. Another section is devoted to materials documenting the 1939 auction at the Galerie Fischer in Lucerne, at which the best of this “degenerate” art was sold to benefit the Reich. Another area contains documentary materials, including newsreel footage, on the concurrent *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, the exhibition of Nazi-approved art held in the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German art).

The introductory gallery leads not directly to the works of art but to three other galleries whose contents establish the sense of cultural oppression that permeated all the arts under the Nazis. “We wanted to get a sense of destiny and oppression without actually saying it,” explained Gehry. In the galleries devoted to film and music, visitors can see and hear the work of directors, composers, and performers banned from stages, movie theaters, and radio. Between these two galleries, a room devoted to literature is designed as a reading room. Newsreel footage of the Nazis’ infamous book-burnings runs continuously in this gallery.

In the seven galleries of paintings, sculptures, and graphics, the challenge was to display the works on their own merits while reminding the viewer how they were vilified in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. “What you don’t want to do,” explained Gehry, “is to make a work of art important simply because of its associations.... These [works] were not made to deal with specific issues, so you

would be maligning them by overdramatizing them.”

The works of art are thus placed in the same gallery groupings as in the 1937 exhibition, but in the dignified manner that befits them. One wall in each of these galleries is a “didactic wall” that interprets the meaning of the group then and now, provides photographic enlargements of the corresponding room in *Entartete Kunst* to document the Nazis’ derisive intent, and includes images of artworks that were either destroyed, lost, or unavailable to this exhibition. Finally, a valuable but disturbing souvenir of *Entartete Kunst* is placed in the largest of these galleries: a four-minute segment of newsreel footage, shot by an American journalist, that shows the crowded Munich exhibition. “This installation,” concludes Gehry, “is all about fragility—and about censorship and conservation.” By letting the works of art—and history—speak for themselves, the installation says a great deal about the fragility of freedom.

Pilar Viladas

*Based on observations of the design process of architect Frank O. Gehry and his staff and curator Stephanie Barron and the staff of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*

## Selected Artists

Based on biographies by Dagmar Grimm, Peter Guenther, and Pamela Kort in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition

### Max Beckmann (1884–1950)

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s Beckmann enjoyed an artistic career marked by honors, prizes, and abundant exhibitions. That changed drastically with the rise of National Socialism. In 1933 Beckmann was dismissed from his teaching post at the Städtisches Kunstinstitut (Municipal art institute) in Frankfurt, and a gallery devoted to his paintings in the Berlin Nationalgalerie was closed. Ten paintings and twelve prints by Beckmann were exhibited in *Entartete Kunst. Kreuzabnahme* (Deposition; fig. 1), originally purchased in 1919 by the Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt, was one of the first images that visitors encountered upon entering the exhibition, which began with a room devoted to religious themes. Nazi authorities viewed the anguished scene of the removal of the emaciated Christ from the cross as a mockery of the sanctified moment depicted.

Beckmann decided to emigrate upon hearing Hitler's speech condemning avant-garde art delivered at the opening of the exhibition of Nazi-approved art in Munich on July 18, 1937. He spent the war years in Holland and came to the United States in 1947, where he taught first at Washington University in Saint Louis and then at the Brooklyn Museum School of Art. He died in New York City in 1950.

FIGURE 1

Max Beckmann (German, 1884–1950)  
*Kreuzabnahme* (Deposition), 1917  
Oil on canvas, 151.2 x 128.9 cm (59½ x 50¾ in.)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Curt Valentin Bequest



**Marc Chagall** (1887–1985)

A Russian-born Jew who painted mainly in France before the Second World War, Chagall's inclusion in *Entartete Kunst* was indicative of the Nazis' fear of imagination and their hatred for anything Jewish. Chagall's fanciful depictions of childhood memories of the ghetto in Vitebsk had a liberating effect on many German Expressionists, and the visionary quality of his work caused André Breton to hail him as the rediscoverer of the metaphorical content of painting. Chagall's fame in Germany was due to the frequent inclusion of his art in exhibitions at Herwarth Walden's Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin and the reproduction of many of his works in German journals. Three of his four paintings in *Entartete Kunst*, including *Purim* (fig. 2), were hung in the "Jewish" gallery (Room 2) on the upper floor of the exhibition.

During the war Chagall accepted an invitation from the Museum of Modern Art to come to New York to avoid persecution. He remained in the United States until

1946, when he returned to France and produced the work that brought him international acclaim, including stained-glass windows for New York and Jerusalem and illustrations for the Bible and Nicolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

FIGURE 2

Marc Chagall (Russian, 1887–1985)  
*Purim or Dorfzene* (Village scene), c. 1916/18  
 Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 72 cm (19 7/8 x 28 3/4 in.)  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art  
 The Louis E. Stern Collection





**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** (1880–1938)

In 1905 in Dresden, Kirchner and his friends Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff formed the artists' group Die Brücke (The bridge), which called upon all youth to fight the older, established powers for greater artistic freedom. By 1921 Kirchner was recognized as one of the leading German Expressionists and was especially known for the bold paintings that epitomized the highly charged atmosphere of postwar Berlin. After the Nazis came to power, Kirchner was dismissed from the Preussische Akademie der Künste (Prussian academy of arts) in Berlin and forbidden to exhibit his work in Germany. More than six hundred of his works were confiscated in 1937, and thirty-two were included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. *Selbstbildnis als Soldat* (Self-portrait as soldier; fig. 3) of 1915 reflects the artist's traumatic experiences in the First World War. The Nazis exhibited the painting in *Entartete Kunst* as *Soldat mit Dirne* (Soldier with whore), completely distorting the interpretation of the image for their own purposes. Kirchner's despondency over his persecution and that of his friends led him to destroy many of his works and, on June 15, 1938, to take his own life.

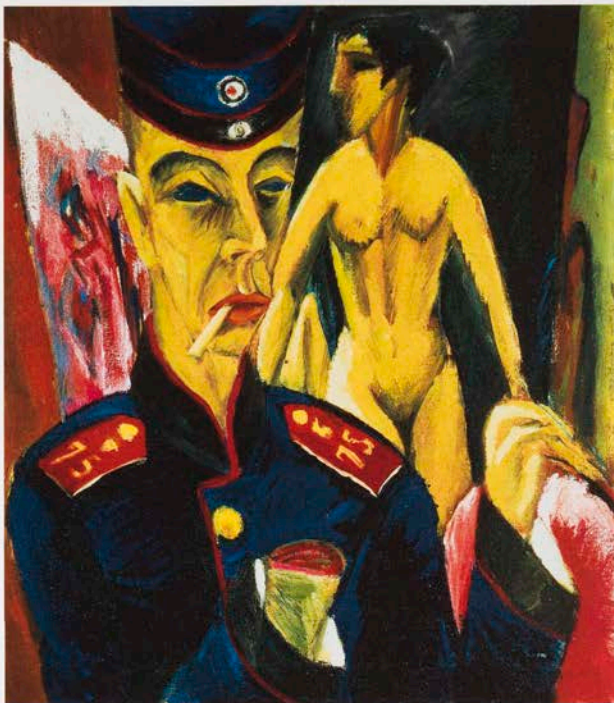


FIGURE 3

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880–1938)  
*Selbstbildnis als Soldat* (Self-portrait as soldier), 1915  
Oil on canvas, 69.2 x 61 cm (27¼ x 24 in.)  
Allen Memorial Art Museum  
Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio  
Charles F. Olney Fund



FIGURE 4

Emil Nolde (German, 1867–1956)  
*Mulattu* (Mulatto woman), 1913  
Oil on canvas, 77.5 x 73 cm (30½ x 28¾ in.)  
The Busch-Reisinger Museum  
Harvard University, Cambridge  
G. David Thompson Fund

**Emil Nolde** (1867–1956)

Nolde's *Abendmahl* (The Last Supper) was the first Expressionist painting to be purchased by a German museum, the Moritzburg in Halle, in 1910. In 1913 Nolde and his wife traveled through Russia, Siberia, China, Japan, and the South Seas, a trip that challenged the artist's long-held conservative ideas about nationalism and racial purity. Nevertheless, in 1920 the politically naive Nolde joined the National Socialist party, finding its ideology in keeping with his own conservative beliefs. In his painting Nolde celebrated the cyclical rhythms of nature, primordial myths and legends, and biblical

motifs. His South Seas oils stressed the exotic and savage. Viewing his work as wholly Nordic, he was confused and depressed to find the National Socialist support of his art falling away in the early 1930s. His boldly painted portrayals of other races, as exemplified by *Mulattu* (Mulatto woman, fig. 4), were viewed by the Nazis as a sign of his degeneracy. The fact that Nolde had been a party member apparently made him a special object of their harassment. A staggering total of 1,052 of Nolde's works were confiscated in 1937 from German museums. He was forbidden to paint but continued to do so in secret in his isolated home in Seebüll, using watercolors to avoid the incriminating odor of oils.

**Wassily Kandinsky** (1866–1944)

By 1910 the Russian-born Kandinsky was living in Munich, had completed his manuscript for the influential *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the spiritual in art), and was working with Franz Marc on the *Almanach des Blauen Reiters* (The blue rider almanac). The First World War necessitated Kandinsky's return to Russia, where he was involved with the flourishing revolutionary art scene. This activity was later interpreted by the Nazis as evidence of Kandinsky's Communist leanings, although the artist was actually rather coolly received by the young revolutionaries and did not himself believe in a state-directed academic program. In 1922 Kandinsky returned to Germany to join the staff of the Bauhaus school, where he taught with Lyonel Feininger, Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, and Oskar Schlemmer, all of whom were maligned in 1933 when the Nazis closed the school. Kandinsky, who had obtained German citizenship in 1928, was forced to leave Germany a second time, settling in Paris. Of the fifty-seven individual works and portfolios of prints by Kandinsky confiscated from German museums, fourteen were shown in *Entartete Kunst*, *Komposition "Ruhe"* (Composition "Silence"; fig. 5) among them. His works were denigrated with the slogan "Crazy at any price," painted on the wall nearby. After the outbreak of war Kandinsky remained in Nazi-occupied Paris where he died in 1941.



FIGURE 5

Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866–1944)  
*Komposition "Ruhe"* (Composition "Silence"), 1928  
Oil on canvas, 52 x 79 cm (20½ x 31¼ in.)  
Debra Weese-Mayer and Robert N. Mayer

**Wilhelm Lehmbruck** (1881–1919)

Lehmbruck died eighteen years before the opening of *Entartete Kunst*. His suicide in 1919 at the age of thirty-eight was precipitated by the extreme sense of loss and depression he felt at the end of the First World War. By the time of his death he had achieved considerable international recognition. He was the only German sculptor in the Armory Show in New York in 1913; one of his two works on view there was the *Grosse Kniende* (Large kneeling woman; fig. 6).

FIGURE 6

Wilhelm Lehmbruck (German, 1881–1919)

*Grosse Kniende* (Large kneeling woman), 1911

Bronze, height 178 cm (70 1/4 in.)

Metropolitan Opera Association



After Lehmbruck's death his wife presented the *Grosse Kniende* as a permanent loan to the city of Munich. The work was added to Room 6 of *Entartete Kunst* three days after the exhibition opened, having been heavily damaged in transport. Of the hundred or so works by Lehmbruck seized from German museums, many were on loan to those institutions from the artist's widow. In a brave move against the Reich, she worked successfully to recover the works that belonged to her, including the *Grosse Kniende* (only after agreeing that she would not use them for the purpose of agitation), and was compensated for the works that had been destroyed.

It was Lehmbruck's tendency toward abstraction and his rejection of trivial naturalism that earned him a place in *Entartete Kunst*. To the Nazi authorities the *Grosse Kniende* was a German Expressionist idol that represented a rejection of their bourgeois values. After the sculpture's inclusion in *Entartete Kunst* the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased a stone cast of the piece that formerly had been in Mannheim. It became a symbol of artistic freedom during the war.

**Otto Dix** (1891–1968)

Dix's art attacked militarism and bourgeois morality through humorous and grotesque erotic imagery. In 1923 he was brought to trial and subsequently acquitted for the dissemination of obscene pictures. Dix's work undermined the German idea of heroism; he unabashedly depicted war and



its horrible consequences in his powerful portfolios *Der Krieg* (War), which were included in *Entartete Kunst* (fig. 7). Throughout the 1920s Dix produced socially engaged art that was well-received by a large audience in Germany. By 1930, however, the National Socialists had branded him a subversive. He remained in Germany but was forbidden to show his art and in 1933 was asked to leave his teaching position at the Dresden Akademie. Approximately 260 of his works were impounded from collections throughout Germany and nineteen paintings and prints and the *Der Krieg* portfolios were included in *Entartete Kunst*. Among them was *Bildnis des Juweliers Karl Krall* (Portrait of the jeweler Karl Krall; fig. 8), a stylized, biting portrait typical of the movement known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New objectivity). This style emerged in the mid-1920s and was, along with Expressionism, condemned by the Nazis. In 1945 Dix was inducted into the army; he was taken prisoner and assigned to an artists' detail. After the war Dix received a variety of honors both at home and abroad but was never invited to return to the faculty of the Dresden Akademie.

FIGURE 7

Otto Dix (German, 1891–1968)  
*Schadel* (Skull)  
From the portfolios *Der Krieg* (War), 1924  
Etching with aquatint, 25.7 x 19.5 cm (10¼ x 7¾ in.)  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
The Robert Gore Rifkind Center  
for German Expressionist Studies

FIGURE 8

Otto Dix  
*Bildnis des Juweliers Karl Krall*  
(Portrait of the jeweler Karl Krall), 1923  
Oil on canvas, 90.5 x 60.5 cm (36¼ x 23¾ in.)  
Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal



## Related Events

For titles of lectures, films, and concerts, ticket information, and descriptions of events at other institutions in Los Angeles please refer to the related events brochure.

### Events in the Galleries

#### *Docent Tours*

Docent tours of the exhibition are offered at 2:15 p.m. daily except Monday, beginning February 19. Tours meet in the Plaza Level foyer of the Robert O. Anderson Building.

#### *Curator's Walk-Throughs*

Tuesday, March 5, and Wednesday, April 3, 9:30 a.m. These informal talks by Stephanie Barron, curator of the exhibition, are open only to museum members. Each talk is limited to fifty people; reservations must be made by calling (213) 857-6141. The Wilshire Boulevard entrance to the museum opens at 9:25 a.m., and the walk-throughs begin in the Plaza Level foyer of the Robert O. Anderson Building.

### Events in the Leo S. Bing Theater

#### *Opening-Day Remarks*

Sunday, February 17, 1 p.m., Stephanie Barron and Dr. Franklin D. Murphy

#### *Lectures*

Sundays at 1 p.m.: March 3, Sander Gilman; March 10, Berthold Hinz; March 24, John Zukowsky; April 7, Peter Jelavich; April 28, Ehrhard Bahr

#### *Symposium*

Saturday, April 6, 9:30 a.m.–5 p.m., "International Responses to the Condemnation of 'Degenerate' Art"

#### *Films*

Films in the series "From Caligari to Hitler" will be shown at 8 p.m. every Friday and Saturday night through March 2. Lecture-screenings on propaganda and censorship will be shown at 8 p.m. in the Dorothy Collins Brown Auditorium on February 13, 25, 26, and 27. Documentaries will be shown on April 11, 18, and 25 at 8 p.m. and April 13, 20, and 27 at 2 p.m.

#### *Music*

Wednesday, February 27, 8 p.m., American String Quartet; Monday, March 11, 8 p.m., USC Chamber Orchestra, Wind Ensemble, Contemporary Music Ensemble; Wednesday, April 3, 8 p.m., "An Evening of Jazz with Rudi Fehr"

### Events in the Dorothy Collins Brown Auditorium

Film Seminar on "Nazi Cinema" with Erwin Leiser, April 17, 22, 23, and 24, 8 p.m.

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