



# Leseprobe

**Max Beckmann**

The Formative Years, 1915–1925

---

Bestellen Sie mit einem Klick für 49,00 €



---

Seiten: 304

Erscheinungstermin: 11. Oktober 2023

Mehr Informationen zum Buch gibt es auf

[www.penguin.de](http://www.penguin.de)

# Inhalte

- Buch lesen
- Mehr zum Autor

## Zum Buch

---

**This generously illustrated and comprehensive book focuses on a decisive decade in Max Beckmann's career as one of the leading figurative painters of the twentieth century. This publication will provide insight into a critical period in the artist's development and the accomplishments that earned him such high esteem. □**

Max Beckmann's brief but profoundly jarring service as a medical orderly during World War I led to a nervous breakdown. He assimilated his experiences and incorporated recent and radical developments in art, such as Cubism and Expressionism, leading him to advance new pictorial conceptions beginning in 1915.

To many of his contemporaries, the work Beckmann created between 1917 and 1925 placed him at the forefront of the latest developments in representational painting. In 1925, Beckmann's celebrated status was confirmed by his prominence in the groundbreaking "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity) exhibition in Mannheim, although he later distanced himself from the term.

This book will situate Beckmann artistically and historically. Essays by both established experts and emerging scholars investigate the seminal energy found in the work he created between 1915 to 1925—a period to which the artist himself repeatedly returned over the course of his lifetime. The self-referential aspect of Beckmann's output is key to understanding his progression as an artist, which comes more clearly into focus via an analysis of these critical early years.

## Autor

---

**MAX BECKMANN**

# **MAX BECKMANN**

## **THE FORMATIVE YEARS**

### **1915–1925**

Edited by Olaf Peters

Preface by Ronald S. Lauder, foreword by Renée Price

With contributions by

Anna Maria Heckmann  
Jürgen Müller

Olaf Peters  
Dietrich Schubert

Elisa Tamaschke  
Christiane Zeiller

With translated texts by

Max Beckmann and Heinrich Simon

**PRESTEL**  
MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK



This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition

**MAX BECKMANN: THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1915–1925**

Neue Galerie New York

October 5, 2023 – January 15, 2024

*Curator*

Olaf Peters

© 2023 Neue Galerie New York;  
Prestel Verlag, Munich ▪ London ▪  
New York; and authors

PAGE 2: Max Beckmann. Photo: ullstein bild /  
ullstein bild via Getty Images

*Exhibition Design*

Richard Pandiscio,  
William Loccisano / Pandiscio Green

Prestel Verlag, Munich  
A member of Penguin Random House  
Verlagsgruppe GmbH  
Neumarkter Strasse 28  
81673 Munich

PAGE 7: Paul Weller, Max Beckmann painting at  
an easel. Photo: Tate Images © Reserved

*Director of Publications*

Scott Gutterman

PAGE 9: Marie-Louise von Motesiczky and Mathilde  
Beckmann in fancy dress with Max Beckmann,  
1920–30s. Photo: Tate Images

*Managing Editor*

Janis Staggs

In respect to links in the book,  
Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe  
expressly notes that no illegal content  
was discernible on the linked sites  
at the time the links were created.  
The Publisher has no influence at all  
over the current and future design,  
content or authorship of the linked  
sites. For this reason Penguin Random  
House Verlagsgruppe expressly  
disassociates itself from all content  
on linked sites that has been altered  
since the link was created and  
assumes no liability for such content.

*Editorial Assistant*

Liesbet Van Leemput

*Book Design*

Richard Pandiscio,  
William Loccisano / Pandiscio Green

*Translation*

Steven Lindberg

*Project Coordinator*

Cornelia Hübler

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

*Production*

Andrea Cobré

*Origination*

Schnieber Graphik, Munich

Library of Congress Control Number:  
2023941002

*Printing and Binding*

Longo AG, Bozen



Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe  
FSC® N001967

Printed in Italy

ISBN 978-3-7913-7994-4

www.prestel.com

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alexander Adler, New York  
Selini Andres, Mannheim  
Art Installation Design, New York  
Mary Ellen Banisch, New York  
Vivian Endicott Barnett, New York  
Frances Beatty, New York  
Mayen Beckmann, Berlin/Cologne  
Tanja Borghardt, Bremen  
Emily Braun, New York  
Antonia Bryan, New York  
Hendrik Bündge, Stuttgart  
Matti Bunzl, New York  
Sam Cameron, New York  
Carla Caputo, New York  
Andrea Cobré, Munich  
Rosa Corral, Minneapolis  
Tina Dähn, Berlin  
Alexander Eiling, Frankfurt am Main  
Fred Elghanayan, New York  
Adina Ferber, New York  
Anna-Lena Goltz, Halle (Saale)  
Scott Hankins, Chapel Hill  
Isabelle Harnoncourt, New York  
Anna Maria Heckmann, Stuttgart  
Kay Heymer, Düsseldorf  
Max Hollein, New York  
Cornelia Hübler, Munich  
Joachim Jäger, Berlin  
Oliver Kase, München  
Evelyn Kelley, New York  
Cait Kennedy, Saint Louis  
Hulya Kolabas, New York  
Hannah Korm, New York  
Anna Kovacs, Waltham  
Jennifer Lim, New York  
Steven Lindberg, Berlin  
Jill Lloyd, London  
Bill Loccisano, Sarasota  
Sirena Maxfield, New York  
Cassie Mazzucco, New York  
Janet Moore, Boston  
Jürgen Müller, Dresden  
Pia Müller-Tamm, Karlsruhe  
Hannah Murray, London  
Vlasta Odell, New York

Richard Pandiscio, New York  
Natasha Perine, Chicago  
Olaf Peters, Halle (Saale)  
Katja Plankenhorn, Karlsruhe  
Carina Plath, Hannover  
Ernst Ploil, Vienna  
Sami Rama, Branford  
Mark Ramirez, Toledo  
Esther-Maria Rittwagen, Lübeck  
Jerry Rivera, New York  
Stella Rollig, Vienna  
Bridget Rymer, New York  
Puppa Sayn-Wittgenstein, New York  
Andreas Schalhorn, Berlin  
Jackie Scalisi, New York  
Mark Schlesinger, San Antonio  
Dieter Scholz, Berlin  
Rachel Schumann, Cologne  
Antje Seeger, Halle (Saale)  
Luise Seppeler, Berlin  
Elizabeth Szancer, New York  
Elisa Tamaschke, Berlin  
Michele Tayler, Houston  
Christina Végh, Bielefeld  
Nara Wood, Cobb  
Yagna Yass-Alston, New York  
Christiane Zeiller, Munich  
Jack Zinterhofer, New York  
Will Zinterhofer, New York  
Tom Zoufaly, New York

## PREFACE

Max Beckmann is truly a giant of modern German art, someone who stands outside of any single category. He was a visionary, a man who captured not only the times he lived in, but someone who could see the future—see what *could* happen and what *would* happen.

I still remember the first time I encountered a work by Beckmann as a teenager in a midtown gallery here in New York. It was a triptych and I instantly saw the power and the strength of this extraordinary artist. I went right out and purchased every book I could find on Beckmann because I was so curious and wanted to learn more about him. This coincided with my growing interest in German and Austrian art.

It has been my good fortune to acquire a number of works by the artist over the years. The first extraordinary Beckmann painting to enter my collection was *Galleria Umberto* (1925). This work is incredibly prophetic in that it contains imagery of things to come. We see an Italian flag sinking into the water as if it is drowning; we see a dismembered figure, suggesting the torture during the Fascist era; there is a crystal ball offering a glimpse into the future and bugle sounding a warning. Think about this for a moment. In 1925, Mussolini had been in power for just three years and it would be another 20 years, two full decades of chaos, before the Italian dictator would meet his ignoble demise. Yet the painting anticipates both the rise and the downfall of Fascism in Italy along with all the turmoil in between. It is a mesmerizing picture, with a bizarre, dreamlike quality that makes it unforgettable.

The highlight for me, though, was the opportunity to acquire, with a fellow collector, the incredible *Self-Portrait with Horn* (1938), which Beckmann painted while he was living in exile in Amsterdam. It's interesting to note that Beckmann left Germany in 1937 on the day after Hitler's radio address on what he called degenerate art. This painting, which had once been in the collection of the artist's friend Stephan Lackner, seems to sum up so much about the experience of refugees, torn from their homeland and forced to establish himself in a new, unfamiliar environment. The horn also announces a warning about the rise of Nazism and intolerance. Because of the clarity and power of this painting, we can still hear that warning today.

I have been pleased to support exhibitions of Beckmann's work over the years, whether at the temporary branch of The Museum of Modern Art in Queens (2003) or in a pairing with Otto Dix at the Neue Galerie (2005). The current exhibition explores the early years of Beckmann's career, from the time of his traumatic experiences during World War I through his success during the Weimar Republic, and finally to the period in which he was driven into exile. All have shown important facets of an individual who gathered the tumultuous events taking place around him and converted them into extraordinary works of art.

The curator for this exhibition is Olaf Peters, who has organized several critically acclaimed shows for the Neue Galerie, including "Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937" (2014) and "Berlin Metropolis: 1918–1933" (2015–16). He has been aided by Richard Pandiscio and Bill Loccisano, who designed the exhibition, and by my longtime associate Tom Zoufaly, who oversaw the installation. Together, they bring to light the gifts of an artist who seemed to sum up, and to transcend, the times he lived in. Museums and individuals in the United States and Europe generously provided key loans, helping to create a full representation of this singular artist. I trust our guests will enjoy experiencing Beckmann as much as I have since first encountering his work more than 50 years ago.

Ronald S. Lauder  
President, Neue Galerie New York

## FOREWORD

Max Beckmann is one of the outstanding painters of the twentieth century. By presenting a monographic exhibition of his work, the Neue Galerie New York is fulfilling a longstanding goal. The museum's extended collection includes central works by Beckmann, such as the major portfolio of prints *Die Hölle* (Hell, 1919) and the early political allegory *Galleria Umberto* (1925). These works represent the point of departure for this project. The basic thesis of the exhibition is that Beckmann, after the profoundly disturbing experience of World War I, managed to advance to a new pictorial conception. The painter both assimilated his experiences and connected to concurrent developments in art. Indeed, our exhibition offers an in-depth look and invites a close reading of key works of these formative years.

There have been several exhibitions on Beckmann in the last couple of years. Ours is different, however, in focusing on this particular time period and his artistic approach. For many of his contemporaries, Beckmann came to epitomize the latest evolution of representational painting. In 1925, when he was 41 years old, Beckmann emerged as the crucial figure in the exhibition "Die Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerie nach dem Expressionismus" (New Objectivity: German Painting after Expressionism) in Mannheim, even though he would later distance himself from that term. This turning point marks the endpoint of our exhibition and explains its restriction to the years from 1915 to 1925.

The exhibition gathers together some of the masterpieces of Beckmann's art including the outstanding paintings *Fastnacht* (Carnival, 1920, Tate, London), *Der Traum* (The Dream, 1921, Saint Louis Art Museum), and *Die Barke* (The Bark, 1926, Private Collection). Our show offers the unique opportunity to experience these works together and to reflect on the genesis of Beckmann's mature style of painting.

A key step to Beckmann's transformation was his focus on religious topics in paintings around 1917-18. They are centrally important in this context and we are proud to display three key examples from major public collections. They reveal his stylistic development but also outline the painter's horizon of interpretation as he sought to portray his own era using the pictorial formulas of the Passion of Christ and other biblical themes.

Around 1920, Beckmann was intensely preoccupied by the social and political fault lines of the era. That is why his work of this phase was considered verism and associated with the leftist wing of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*—something that is often forgotten today. Beckmann himself spoke of his art in terms of "transcendental objectivity." The subjects of these works prepare the ground, in terms of both form and content, for Beckmann's later paintings.

The Neue Galerie exhibition and the catalogue are not just about the bolstering of his stature as an artist from 1915 to 1925, but also about the seminal energy he brought to his work at the time; the artist himself repeatedly returned to this phase over the course of his career. The self-referential aspect of Beckmann's work thus comes clearly into view. It is our aspiration to contribute to a deeper understanding of Beckmann's artistic productivity.

The exhibition was conceived and has been organized by Prof. Dr. Olaf Peters, who has taught art history in Halle an der Saale University since 2006 and is an esteemed Member of the Board of Trustees of the Neue Galerie. He also has organized the exhibitions "Otto Dix" (2010), and the trilogy "Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937" (2014), "Berlin Metropolis: 1918-1933" (2015-16), and "Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s" (2018) for the Neue Galerie. His thesis at the University of Bonn was a broad monograph on Beckmann, and he is one of the leading experts on the artist. Prof. Dr. Peters, together with his fellow authors Ms. Anna Maria Heckmann, Prof. Dr. Jürgen Müller,



lows and in the other essays in this catalogue in order to explain the growing rift as well as the continuity that are manifest in his oeuvre. It distinguishes the early work from the work from 1915 onward and then also characterizes the later development after 1925. The decade between 1915 and 1925 mediates between two larger blocks of pictures and itself represents such a block, one that is without question a summit in German painting of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

The famous controversy between Beckmann and Marc flared up already in 1912.<sup>6</sup> In the journal *Pan*, Beckmann argued for "*Sachlichkeit*,"<sup>7</sup> and polemicized against Fauvism, Primitivism, and Expressionism. Above all, Beckmann took aim at the increasingly clear trend to abandon the representational image: "What is feeble and overly aesthetic about this so-called new painting is its failure to distinguish between the idea of a wallpaper or poster and that of a 'picture.'"<sup>8</sup> The fundamental artistic conflict between, on the one hand, his own Impressionist painting style, which was ill-suited to mastering the large, sometimes sublime subjects (Crucifixion, shipwreck, earthquake) he chose and, on the other, his dismissive reaction toward the contemporaneous trends of the avant-garde, made it necessary for the artist to thoroughly rethink his own position. The literary scholar and theorist of the avant-garde Peter Bürger rightly called him a "thinking artist," because he was trying to fathom the problems of painting not just in practice but also in theory.<sup>9</sup>

Beckmann had reached a dead end and had to reformulate his approach to painting<sup>10</sup> if he wanted to assert himself in the continual battles of the artistic field.<sup>11</sup> Following his encounter with the latest European painting at the "Herbstsalon" (Autumn Salon) in Berlin in 1913<sup>12</sup>, and the fundamental criticism of

Beckmann's earlier oeuvre as "geriatric"<sup>13</sup>, and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, which was like a catalyst for the fundamental stylistic transformation of his work.<sup>14</sup> He had to react to this and tried to situate his own concept on the threshold between a planar, stylishly decorative and a spatial one, which he understood as a dichotomy. Influenced by Rembrandt van Rijn, Francisco Goya, and the early Paul Cézanne, he emphasized spatial depth in his art: "As for myself, I paint and try to develop my style exclusively in terms of deep space, something that in contrast to superficially decorative art penetrates as far as possible into the very core of nature and the spirit of things."<sup>15</sup> That did not, however, keep Beckmann from productively reworking the so-called decorative art he loathed and integrating it into his visual cosmos, for example, by making use of the achievements of Cubism in pictorial autonomy.

World War I, in which Beckmann volunteered as a medical orderly, prompted the painter to find a new form of objective perception and representation. Initially, Beckmann proudly reported to his wife, Minna Beckmann-Tube, on his daily experiences in the war.<sup>16</sup> He soon abandoned that. The experience of combat radicalized modern artists in their manner of aesthetic expression and techniques in both form and content, and so too Beckmann.<sup>17</sup> That meant a break with his early painted work; Beckmann only achieved a unique artistic style because of the war. The process of transforming and breaking away from his early monumental Impressionist paintings can indeed be followed in a sometimes-oppressive way in his paintings, his drawings, and his letters from the field.<sup>18</sup> It is not so much the personal existential threat—Beckmann was hardly at great risk in his activities as a medical orderly—as it was the experience of horror in the face of death and mutilation that

---

1. Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait (Laughing)*, 1910, oil on canvas. Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin. Photo: akg-images

this great madness in which we are now living more than before."<sup>50</sup> In May of that year he wrote to Piper again: "Yes, the war. Hopefully, you are still doing fine, by the way. In that respect. The only thing that is still possible is art and for me painting. In these times when all concepts are turned upside down you can only live in this mixture of somnambulism and dreadful awareness unless you want to be just as dull as an animal."<sup>51</sup>

The artist described the goal of his painting: "to confine [reality], to beat it down and to strangle it."<sup>52</sup> External reality is forced into an abstract formal framework on the canvas, thus literally subjecting it to the reality of the painting. Beckmann urgently expressed this in his "Confession," or, "Creative Credo," which was written during the final phase of the war but not published until two years later. Because it is so important, we reproduce it in full in this catalogue (see pp. 48–50). He writes there regarding the production of the picture: "I don't cry. I hate tears, they are a sign of slavery. I keep my mind on my business—on a leg, on an arm, on the penetration of the surface thanks to the wonderful effects of foreshortening, on the partitioning of space, on the relationship of straight and curved lines. [...] Most important for me is volume, trapped in height and width; volume on the plane, depth without losing the awareness of the plane, the architecture of the picture."<sup>53</sup>

The passage powerfully demonstrates Beckmann's existential despair in the face of devastating historical events. The painter imposed on himself a stoic, almost fatalistic stance that was intended to immunize him against such historical events. He fled into the picture, where he could and did do violence to the external reality that could not be controlled. There he could impose his aesthetic, form-controlling, Old Master, and Cubist sty-

listic principles. This passage confirms the sharp observation of Alfred Neumeyer, which still deserves to be underscored, that the paintings of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*—to which Beckmann's work of this period certainly belonged, in the form of critical verism<sup>54</sup>—had lost an "awareness of reality," despite its ostentatiously displayed "cult of the object."<sup>55</sup> It is therefore incorrect when referring to paintings from around 1920 to speak of space in the classical sense of the optically consistent organization of three-dimensionality. A space in the literal sense is shown: for example, you can see the planks of a floor, the walls, and the boards of a wooden ceiling. But this space, which appears to be organized according to one-point perspective, soon proves to be an illusion that is in the process of disassociating. Paintings of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* do not offer a naturalistic depiction of visible reality; rather, they transfer reality into the painted image. In doing so, they break it up by unsettling traditional ways of seeing by means of perspectival rifts and leaps or overly sharp, unreal depictions—for example, views from up close and from afar that are equally sharp—and so it does lose an awareness of reality in Neumeyer's sense. The "continuous surface cohesiveness"<sup>56</sup> of the paintings that Beckmann produced as if by force conflicts with a traditional perspectival rendering of the pictorial space to which he had been largely indebted, despite several exceptions, before the war. Beckmann's unconventional and productive synthesis of the art of the Old Masters and that of Cubism is manifested here.

Beckmann addressed these connections in a letter to Reinhard Piper of February 8, 1918, with a clearly anti-Expressionist thrust. He was reflecting on the aforementioned crisis of Expressionism, which would soon be replaced by Dadaism and the verism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*: "It is truly interesting for

### A FORCED PICTORIAL ORDER TO OVERCOME CONTINGENCY

In his brilliant analysis of the 1921 painting *The Dream*, the Heidelberg art historian Wilhelm Fraenger worked out perspectives on Beckmann's painting of this period that can be generalized.<sup>59</sup> He writes, for example, that the relief character of the painting that is repeatedly visibly interrupted is supported by the overall pale coloration of the picture. It grants wide space to the formal aspect, to the drawing, and one senses "a very sharp, especially and painfully sharp, fixation of the object by means of form."<sup>60</sup> The canvas confronts the viewer in this way as a self-contained tectonic framework. It is unshakeable, even though everything has become jumbled up, and so the relationship of form and content seems problematic. Fraenger pointed to this antagonistic structure and recognized it as the painting's true set of problems: "If we try to define Beckmann's idea of form in terms of his ethical character, we observe an earnest striving for pictorial clarity and regularity, for discipline and rule and verse meter. This ordering tendency of the sense of form runs strictly counter to Beckmann's will to express himself. Because he aims straight for ugliness, arbitrariness, and violence, disfiguring and deforming, in a word: for the anarchy of the grotesque that explodes all norms."<sup>61</sup>

Fraenger sees in Beckmann's work an irresolvable conflict between a constructive, objective will to order and a subjective will to express himself. The work produces an ambivalent sensation of order and compulsion, of norm and arbitrariness. In Fraenger's view, the artist painted to combat solipsistic isolation and the individualistic-atomist structure of life today. He ordered, tamed, and disciplined the disorder of life. He was painting the world as it should be,<sup>62</sup> even when it meant doing violence to it. Fraenger is getting at the afore-

mentioned central matter that the painter was trying to record and control via his art—the chaos of his time. The painter's will to form, modeled on the early German masters, was to capture and order a senseless world and an almost unbearable randomness.<sup>63</sup> In late 1922, Beckmann emphasized to his publisher Reinhard Piper the role of the early German artists: "It is very nice that you are publishing something about the early German painters. Right now, especially, it is a matter of struggling to keep from falling back into an archaizing time, but only, with an awareness of our own insane and yet strong time, become lovingly conscious of our ancestors. And the proper selection under the proper light can contribute a great deal to that."<sup>64</sup>

Seemingly paradoxically, the attempt to create order could culminate in an impression of the mechanically determined and of "fatality." Hausenstein expresses that view: "Beckmann possesses more and in a stronger way than any other painter today (or any day) the sense of the mechanical quality of our age." And he goes on to speak of transitions from the human into the technical, of the organic into the mechanical, and of the soulful into the material-constructive, and then continues: "Beckmann is the protagonist of such insightful perception. That accounts for the mechanical connection and machine-like functioning of his paintings, especially of the terrible period from 1920 to 1925: from *Fastnacht* (Carnival) [Plate 67] to *Galleria Umberto* [Plate 101] (which should really be called arcade)."<sup>65</sup> We are able to show both paintings in our exhibition and hence present major works that impressively mark the timespan emphasized by his contemporaries.

*Carnival* a very personal painting for the artist and stands at the beginning of the sometimes-eccentric vertical formats that

Beckmann will later select for major works and the individual panels of the triptychs of 1932–33.<sup>66</sup> In the center we see Fridel Battenberg. Beckmann was able to stay at her home at the beginning of his Frankfurt period. She is standing precisely on the central axis of the painting with her legs casually crossed. She is flanked not by her husband, Ugi, but by Beckmann's Berlin-based art-dealer Jsrael Ber Neumann.<sup>67</sup> A figure in a grotesque animal mask is lying curled up on the floor: it is generally thought to be Beckmann himself, whose masked mouth outlined in red touches Fridel Battenberg's red shoes, whose color takes up the eye and hue of the mask. This eye is directed frontally at the viewer, but artificially; Fridel, by contrast, gazes with her blue eyes into a vague distance; and Neumann appears to be looking at Fridel but scarcely reaches her. The entire scene takes place in a cramped space overfilled with objects and beings (candles, mirror, gramophone, horn, champagne bucket, dog, and cat). Beckmann skillfully harmonizes the forms and colors. Directions are indicated and adopted, and yet it all plays out within the narrow, vertical, rectangle of the painting without really crossing the edge of the painting. It suggests comparison with late medieval carved altarpieces, as if their compression of figures has been transferred to canvas. The indications of the space and its volumes being partially splintered and faceted reflect Beckmann's grappling with Cubism, whose lack of color is, however, ostentatiously outdone in this comparatively colorful painting. The theme of carnival justifies the garish and grotesque qualities of this overture "of the terrible period from 1920 to 1925" (Wilhelm Hausenstein). Beckmann's *The Dream* of the following year, 1921, transports this into the immediate present day of Berlin, which Beckmann visited at the beginning of the Weimar Republic and addressed in the *Berliner Reise* (Trip to Berlin) series of prints

[see p. 158].<sup>68</sup> In the painting, the costumed cripples and a blind hurdy-gurdy man evoke the misery of the postwar era.

*Das Trapez* (The Trapeze) [Plate 73] of 1923 takes up one central theme in Beckmann's art—alongside the café, the dancehall, and the variety theater:<sup>69</sup> the iconography of carnies and the circus.<sup>70</sup> Beckmann compresses the seven artists into a tight space: they interlock, touch, and sometimes hold one another, and yet they also move past one another in a strangely disconnected way. The lowest figure, with his legs in an extreme split, almost appears to have been trampled down. The female figure at lower left combines eroticism with compulsion in that her nipple is visible, while her closed eyes and slender red mouth suggest a certain forbearance. Moving relatively freely, by contrast, the large female figure on the right and the young man in a striped leotard, who looks like a mixture of Beckmann and his son, Peter, move comparatively freely. The man in the white leotard stuck under the ceiling holding an iron chain in his mouth completes the scene and corresponds, like one part of a bracket, to the figure pressed to the floor.

Hard black contours frame the colors, and Beckmann has created a wonderful chord of lemony green, reddish pink, and indigo. The ropes holding the trapeze bar make the figures look like a heap of marionettes that have been carelessly tossed aside but take on a certain life of their own, even as they appear rigid and transfixed. Their large, dark eyes underscore that interpretation in an almost melancholy way. Only the crouching figure on the right, whom Beckmann has given another mask—this one fiery red and fleshy—stands apart somewhat. He is facing out of the structure, while one white-gloved hand seems to be raised at the edge of the painting, as if to

no 'Expressionist'; nor does he have anything to do with the galvanic arts with which the 'Neue Sachlichkeit' is trying to conjure the corpses of our epoch back to an artificial life in artificial clarity, to a sterilized life in germ-free atmospheres."<sup>78</sup> The critic was, however, following here the painter's own attempt to distance himself,<sup>79</sup> making himself the latter's mouthpiece, but this is untenable from today's perspective. In the first half of the 1920s, Beckmann was one proponent of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, perhaps even the main one. His work is associated with an emphatically representational painting that polemically distinguished itself from Expressionism and yet was still related to it.

For Hartlaub, Beckmann was the "greatest living artist," and in 1928 he became the first museum director in Germany to organize a survey of his works.<sup>80</sup> The Kunsthalle came close to acquiring Beckmann's 1918-19 magnum opus *The Night*. Hartlaub's predecessor Fritz Wichert had brought the painting to the museum for viewing. It appeared, however, that the acquisition could not get past the committee responsible, however, so it was never even presented to it. The Kunsthalle did purchase *Christ and the Sinner* and *Portrait with an Old Lady/Mrs. Tube*. The museum's director tied his hopes for a future artistic evolution in Germany to Beckmann personally. Hartlaub expected a productive synthesis from him. It was supposed to overcome from the outset the "two-wing" separation of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* he had himself made in 1922, which remains problematic today: "perhaps tomorrow or the day after the two currents will be unified and a broad riverbed created in the process. We await a future, redeemed Max Beckmann"<sup>81</sup> [Fig. 11].

Then in 1928 it seemed to Hartlaub "as if the long, arduous climb has only now ended, as if

the high route is only now really beginning."<sup>82</sup> For him, the painter was the "protagonist of the epoch," whose oeuvre reflected Germany's evolution after World War I. The art historian saw in Beckmann's paintings from 1924–25 onward a new, unfamiliar composure and asked: "Does this relative assuagement of Beckmann's latest art reflect a recovery of our age, a purification, stabilization of our entire being after so much boundless destruction?"<sup>83</sup> Our exhibition attempts to make precisely this artistic process and this expectation of the time clearly understandable. In the early 1920s Beckmann was working out a position as a painter that he gradually changed and rewrote. But it remained the prerequisite for a late work that, while probably never revealing a "redeemed Beckmann" (Gustav F. Hartlaub), continues to draw attention, to seem topical, and to challenge our seeing and understanding in a productive way.

*Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg*

#### Acknowledgments

This exhibition and publication have been a labor of love. In 2010 I had the pleasure of organizing a monographic exhibition on Otto Dix for the Neue Galerie, which was to be supplemented by a similar exhibition on Max Beckmann. I thank Ronald S. Lauder, Renée Price, and the Neue Galerie team for their enduring trust and support.

The concept for the exhibition and my arguments in the essays and work descriptions had their foundation in my extensive and detailed monograph *Vom schwarzen Seiltänzer: Max Beckmann zwischen Weimarer Republik und Exil* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005), and have been taken up, updated, and reexamined here.

