

PRESS RELEASE

MAX BECKMANN'S PAINTING *EISGANG* TO REMAIN AT THE STÄDEL MUSEUM

**IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES AND GERMANY'S
JOINT DECLARATION ON NAZI-CONFISCATED ART, THE STÄDELSCHER
MUSEUMS-VEREIN REACHES AGREEMENT WITH THE HEIRS OF THE FORMER
JEWISH OWNERS, WHO WERE MURDERED UNDER THE NATIONAL SOCIALISTS**

Frankfurt am Main, 5 March 2018. In the course of its systematic provenance research, the Frankfurt's Städel Museum received an inquiry from a third party relating to the problematic provenance of *Eisgang* (1923), an oil painting by Max Beckmann (1884–1950). The painting is listed in the official register of cultural objects of national significance and depicts a typical Frankfurt scene with the River Main and the Eiserne Steg (iron footbridge). It was acquired in 1994 by the Städtischer Museums-Verein. It has since transpired that the original owner of the work was Fritz Neuberger, a Jewish textile manufacturer from Frankfurt, who had bought the painting directly from Max Beckmann. Neuberger and his wife Hedwig were persecuted by the National Socialists, deported, and murdered in eastern Poland. Many of the details of what happened to the picture can no longer be traced. Everything suggests, however, that the Neuberger family was dispossessed of *Eisgang* as a result of political persecution. After many years of research by the Städel Museum and intensive discussions between the board of the Städtischer Museums-Verein and the heirs of the Neuberger family, the two parties have now reached an amicable "goodwill agreement", representing a fair and just resolution of the case in accordance with the Washington Principles on Nazi-confiscated art and making it possible for the painting to remain permanently in Frankfurt. A plaque next to the painting will commemorate the tragic fate of the original owners, Fritz Neuberger and his wife.

To achieve the agreed settlement, the Städtischer Museums-Verein was given generous financial support from the German Federal Government. In a statement, the Minister of State for Culture, Monika Grütters, said: "*Eisgang*, dating from Beckmann's years in Frankfurt, is not only a key work in the oeuvre of this great German Expressionist; with its depiction of the Eiserne Steg, a landmark of the city on the Main, it is an important and well-loved symbol of regional identity for the people of Frankfurt and beyond. It is a priority for the Federal Government to promote

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fair and just resolutions, in line with the Washington Principles, by supporting purchases such as this. That it has been made possible for *Eisgang* to remain in Frankfurt is a remarkable solution, not only for Frankfurt, but for the German museum landscape as a whole.”

In a statement Städel director, Philipp Demandt, commented: “We are pleased and tremendously grateful to have been able to reach a fair and amicable resolution which allows Beckmann’s *Eisgang* to remain in the Städel Museum’s collection, and thus on public view in its place of origin. In reaching this agreement, the Städel Museum and the Städtischer Museums-Verein hope to give another clear message that, even though we are not public institutions, we are committed to the principles of the Washington Declaration and are willing to face up to the responsibility of historic injustice.”

Sylvia von Metzler, President of the Städtischer Museums-Verein, announced: “Max Beckmann’s *Eisgang* is one of those paintings which are particularly popular with the Frankfurt public and which play a key role in shaping the unique identity of the Städel collection – and I am very glad that we have managed to retain in Frankfurt a painting whose original acquisition, in 1994, was only possible thanks to the Städtischer Museums-Verein.”

Max Beckmann: *Eisgang* (1923)

Measuring 47.5 cm by 59.5 cm, the canvas is one of more than a dozen views of the city painted in oils by Max Beckmann during his time in Frankfurt. The important Expressionist artist spent 17 years of his life in the city, where he developed a close friendship with the director of the Städel, Georg Swarzenski. Until he was removed from his post by the National Socialists in April 1933, Beckmann was a professor at the Städtische art academy. His painting *Eisgang* shows a typical view of the Main in Frankfurt. Looking upstream from the Untermainbrücke on a quiet winter morning, it takes in the old town with St. Bartholomew’s Cathedral, the Eiserne Steg, and, on the right, the bank on the Sachsenhausen side of the river. It was a very familiar view for Beckmann – the route from his flat in Schweizer Strasse to the town centre led over the bridge. The view is not topographically exact: Beckmann’s whole attention is on the river, lying like a dark ribbon between its two banks. Great ice floes are floating down the Main, accentuating the dynamic movement of the river. The cool tones in which the landscape is rendered are heightened by the cold light of a crescent moon. The bare trees and two muffled figures on bicycles on the Sachsenhausen bank emphasise the underlying melancholy of the nocturnal, mysterious scene. One of the few winter pictures in Beckmann’s oeuvre, this is an exemplary expression of the artist’s pessimism about the modern world, often perceived as cold and unfeeling.

Describing the painting when it was exhibited in 1924 at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Benno Reifenberg, wrote:

“The town is huddled in on itself; as if it were freezing, as if it were afraid of the power of the river, as if it were shrinking under the cold, pitiless grey sky. [...] Ice floes are gliding down the dark river. Like strange fish with broad backs, sharp snouts. They stream round the bend in the Main. They move silently past the city, impelled by a mighty, distant force. Now and then they brush against the reddish quays. With an ominous grinding sound.”

Shown at the Documenta III exhibition of 1964, the painting has been listed in Germany's register of cultural objects of national significance since 2011. Today, the Städel Museum houses a total of fifteen paintings, two sculptures and numerous drawings and prints by Max Beckmann. *Eisgang*, so important to Frankfurt, is an established part of the permanent exhibition, and is displayed in a special Beckmann Gallery.

The provenance of the work

Eisgang came originally from the private collection of the Jewish textile manufacturer, Fritz Neuberger (1877–1943), who acquired it directly from the artist before 1928, and in whose possession it definitely remained until at least December 1931. Up to this point the provenance of the painting is fully documented, but here the paper trail relating to the chain of ownership is interrupted. It was not until after the war, in 1952, that the painting reappeared in another private collection in Frankfurt. It was sold through a gallery in 1953 to a private collector, from whose heirs the Städtelscher Museums-Verein acquired it in 1994. The Verein bought the picture in good faith, with funds from the Kulturstiftung der Länder, the Marga und Kurt Möllgaard-Stiftung and wide-ranging support from its members and the people of Frankfurt.

Up to now, the Städel's research has been unable to fill a gap of around 20 years in the documented provenance of the painting, a gap which includes the years of National Socialism. The research shows, however, that Fritz Neuberger very likely lost possession of the painting during the Nazi era. The Neubergeres were driven from their home in Frankfurt's Westend neighbourhood in the summer of 1941 and in 1942, after an interim stay in the so-called 'Ghettohaus' at 14 Gausstrasse, they were deported to eastern Poland and probably murdered at the Maidanek concentration camp. The couple left a son, who survived the Holocaust because his parents had managed to send him to England in 1939 with an international relief organisation. A year later he fled from there to the USA. Research conducted by the Städel was able to trace several attempts made by the Neubergeres' son, dating from immediately after the war until as late as the mid-1980s, to prove the loss of the painting, without, however, being able to provide concrete evidence as to the

circumstances of its loss and without knowing its then whereabouts. He stated, amongst other things, that as far as he remembered, the painting was still in his parents' possession at the time of his emigration in 1939. He died in 1997 at the age of 75. As part of its own provenance research, the Städel Museum had attempted to trace possible heirs of Fritz Neuberger when it was itself approached by the heirs' legal representatives.

Provenance research at the Städel Museum

Since as early as 2001, the Städel Museum in Frankfurt has been systematically researching the provenance of every object which was acquired during the Nazi era or which changed ownership, or might have changed ownership, during this period – making it one of the first German museums to do so. The basis for this research is the Washington Declaration, formulated in 1998 at the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, and the subsequent Joint Declaration between the federal government, the 16 German states, and all local municipalities in Germany. For every object that was acquired after 1933 and that can be dated to before 1945, the Museum attempts to examine and continues to research the history of ownership. Alongside these ongoing efforts, the administration and management of the Städel Museum decided, in 2008, to invite an independent team of researchers, in collaboration with the “Degenerate Art” Research Centre at the University of Hamburg, to examine the history of the institution during the National Socialist era. In 2011, the results of this research were issued by the Centre under the title *Museum im Widerspruch*, one of its series of research volumes published by the Berliner Akademie-Verlag.

So far, it has been proven that eleven objects from the holdings of paintings, drawings and prints at the Städelisches Kunstinstitut and the Städtische Galerie, and five objects from the holdings of the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung were lost by their owners as a result of Nazi era persecution, and these have either been returned to the owners' heirs or re-acquired from them.

Details of work:

Max Beckmann (1884–1950)

Eisgang, 1923

oil on canvas, 47,5 x 59,5 cm

Acquired in 1994 with means provided by the Kulturstiftung der Länder, the Marga and Kurt Möllgaard-Foundation and other donors, Property of Städelischer Museums-Verein e.V. and the Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

Photo: Städel Museum - ARTOTHEK

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