

WALL TEXTS

BECKMANN

3 DECEMBER 2025–15 MARCH 2026

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Max Beckmann. Drawings

Max Beckmann (1884–1950) was a prominent figure of European modernism. He received academic training as a painter and was initially influenced by Impressionism. After his traumatic experiences of World War I, he developed an unmistakable pictorial language of his own. He sought to expose the hidden mechanisms of a world that he perceived as a grotesque theatre.

His point of departure was personal experience. The art historian Julius Meier-Graefe referred to the keen observer Max Beckmann as a 'life digger' (Meier-Graefe 1924, p. 34). Yet the artist also took important impulses from the philosophical, religious and esoteric writings as well as the poetry and mythology he studied in great depth. He interrogated this material with regard to such aspects as underlying truths, his role as an artist and the relationship between the sexes. His approach was deeply subjective, and the result was an 'art of the self' (Westheim 1923, p. 101) that transcended the bounds of the purely autobiographical by way of allusion and mystification.

Drawing forms the core of Beckmann's prolific oeuvre opens the door to a cosmos all its own. Throughout his career, it aided the artist in transformation processes – both form- and content-related – and served him as a means of collecting motifs and finding and inventing imagery. It was not by chance that Wilhelm coined the term 'painter-draughtsman' for him in 1921 (Hausenstein 1921).

BIOGRAPHY

1884

Max Beckmann is born in Leipzig on 12 February; in 1895 the family moves to Braunschweig

1900–1903

Attends the Grossherzoglich- Sächsische Kunstschule in Weimar

1904

Moves to Berlin after a six-month stay in Paris

1906

Exhibits successfully at the Berliner Secession; marriage to Minna Tube

1908

Birth of their son Peter

1913

First solo exhibition at Paul Cassirer in Berlin

1915

Move to Frankfurt am Main; frequent trips to Berlin

1918

First purchases of Beckmann works for the Städel Museum

1925

Divorce from Minna Beckmann-Tube; marriage to Mathilde von Kaulbach;
appointment to the Frankfurt School of Arts and Crafts (Kunstgewerbeschule, now
the Städelschule)

1928

Major Beckmann exhibition in Mannheim

1929–1932

Paris is the artist's main place of residence; monthly visits to Frankfurt to fulfil his
teaching obligations at the School of Arts and Crafts

1933

Adolf Hitler is appointed Reich chancellor; Beckmann is dismissed from his teaching
post at the Frankfurt School of Arts and Crafts; the Beckmanns move to Berlin

1934

The Beckmanns begin considering emigration to Paris or Amsterdam

1937

In the framework of the 'degenerate art' campaign, works by Beckmann are
confiscated from German museums; the Beckmanns leave Germany for Amsterdam

1937

Leaves Germany for Amsterdam

1938/39

In Paris for nine months; World War II begins; the Beckmanns return to Amsterdam

1940

German troops march into Amsterdam; Beckmann burns his diaries; the attempt to leave Europe for the U.S. fails due to lack of visas

1945

Allied troops liberate Amsterdam

1947/48

Temporary teaching assignment in Saint Louis; in June 1948 brief return to Amsterdam

1948

In September official emigration to the U.S.; large solo exhibition at the Saint Louis City Art Museum with further venues in Los Angeles, Detroit, Baltimore and Minneapolis

1949

Begins working at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York

1950

Max Beckmann dies in New York on 27 December

Beginnings in Berlin

Beckmann's early oeuvre bears close stylistic affinities to German Impressionism; his painting and drawing technique betray the influence of Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth. In terms of content, however, he parted ways with those forebears: for Beckmann, art was a metaphor for life, for fundamental, existential conflicts. He confidently carried out monumental history paintings on biblical and mythological themes as well as contemporary occurrences – and met with success. The first monograph on Max Beckmann came out in 1913 (Kaiser 1913).

However, it was a period in which Expressionism was gaining ever wider recognition. After critics slammed Beckmann's ambitious painting on the sinking of the Titanic (1912/13, Saint Louis Art Museum) in 1913, he felt compelled to define his artistic

position. Now he increasingly explored his own firsthand experiences, particularly of modern big-city life, as a source for his subject matter.

The Artist in the War

Beckmann hoped – at first euphorically – to gain new impulses for his art from World War I and volunteered for medical service. His letters to his wife, published in the magazine *Kunst und Künstler* in 1914 and 1915, testify to his initial enthusiasm. In numerous drawings he recorded his impressions of the soldiers' everyday life and the Flemish landscape and its inhabitants, but also the direct effects of the war: destroyed villages, dead cattle, hospital scenes and 'war-weary soldiers'. Hard lines increasingly replaced the soft gradations of his earlier works. Reduced, distorted forms came to dominate the artist's depictions of figures. In Strasbourg, Beckmann began work on *Resurrection*, the only oil painting in which he reflected directly on his war experiences. He never finished it.

'Base of Operations' in Frankfurt am Main

Following the life-changing experiences of World War I, Beckmann did not return to his family. Minna Beckmann-Tube started working as an opera singer in Elberfeld, while the artist moved in with friends in Frankfurt am Main. Hardly painting at first, he found his way to his new style in prints and drawings. He explored the international avant-gardes and Early German art, feeding his imagery with the artistic deliberations of his war-time service. Reductive forms, frequently projected onto the surface two-dimensionally, soon came to dominate the pictorial structure. Perspectival distortions created instability and dynamic. And Beckmann focused his gaze again and again on the world's imperfections.

Success for the artist was not long in coming and manifested in solo exhibitions and purchases of his works by museums. In the late 1920s, he travelled from his 'base of operations' in Frankfurt (J. B. Neumann, 'Sorrow and Champagne', in: Harter/von Wiese 2011, p. 292) to the major art centres: Berlin, New York, Basel and above all Paris, which he made his primary place of residence in 1929.

The Nazi Era: A Defining Break

When the National Socialists took power in April 1933, Beckmann lost his teaching post at the Frankfurt School of Arts and Crafts. His art came to be vilified as 'degenerate'. Soon, exhibitions were all but impossible, and the artist increasingly took refuge in his work. The only collectors and patrons to uphold their ties to him were a small circle with whom he was friends. It would nevertheless take him until after his emigration to the U.S. in 1947 to pick up the thread of the success he had enjoyed in Frankfurt.

During the N.S. era, Beckmann's art became increasingly charged with mythological content and ever more difficult to decipher. A special group of watercolours carried out in 1933 bears eloquent witness to this new phase of his oeuvre.

Exile in Amsterdam

In 1937, in response to the threatening political developments in Germany, the Beckmanns left the country and went to Amsterdam. Owing to the beginning of World War II, their stay there – actually intended merely as a temporary stop on the way to Paris – would end up lasting nearly ten years. Although the couple had conceived the plan in 1940, it was not until 1947 that they managed to emigrate to the U.S.

Beckmann experienced his time in Amsterdam as an exile overshadowed by existential fears triggered not only by the threat of being conscripted. His contacts to the outside, not only to collectors and patrons – particularly those in Frankfurt – but also to Helmuth Lütjens (the head of the Cassirer art dealership) in Amsterdam and, after the war's end, to the gallerist Curt Valentin in New York, were vitally important to him.

He had Georg Hartmann, the owner of the Bauersche Gießerei (foundry) in Frankfurt, to thank for two important commissions: the lithographs for the *Apocalypse* (1941/42) and subsequently the drawings for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust: The Second Part of the Tragedy*. They constituted one of the major works of Beckmann's Amsterdam period, and his drawing oeuvre would continue to hark back to them even many years later.

Fresh Start in the U.S.

Beckmann had already undertaken steps to emigrate to the U.S. back in 1940. It was not until 1947, however, that he was issued a visitor visa for a temporary teaching assignment in Saint Louis. The Beckmanns finally received their entry permits in September 1948, enabling them to settle in the United States once and for all.

Thanks to a growing network of art dealers, collectors and museum people, the artist quickly gained a foothold in the American art world. In addition to travelling, teaching and giving lectures, he pursued his artistic work as persistently as ever. Unfazed by the increasing tendency towards abstraction in the art of his time, he continued his endeavour to depict figures, space and the truth behind outward appearances.