

PRESS RELEASE

BECKMANN

3 DECEMBER 2025–15 MARCH 2026

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Press Preview: Tuesday, 2 December 2025, 11.00 am

Frankfurt am Main, 4 November 2025. Max Beckmann created his work in a world marked by crises and upheavals, transforming his experiences of this into a visual language that remains fascinating to this day. The most intimate part of his oeuvre are his drawings: like a diary, they document his artistic development, serving as a medium for observation and for creating imagery. The Städel Museum is now putting these works centre stage and presenting some eighty pieces from all phases of his career—from little-known drawings to outstanding major works. They offer a direct and intense insight into the life and work of Max Beckmann (1884–1950), one of the most important artists of the modern era.

The Städel Museum holds one of the most outstanding Beckmann collections in the world and has been dedicated to collecting, researching and communicating his work for more than a century. In 2021, the museum received a remarkable addition to its holdings in the form of important permanent loans from the collection of Karin and Rüdiger Volhard. This, together with the publication of the three-volume catalogue raisonné of Max Beckmann's black-and-white drawings by Hirmer Verlag—with which Hedda Finke and Stephan von Wiese have closed one of the last major gaps in research on Beckmann's drawings—is the occasion for this retrospective exhibition.

The exhibition is based on drawings from the Städel Museum's own collection, complemented by loans from renowned international museums and private collections, including The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the British Museum in London, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Hamburger Kunsthalle, the Kupferstichkabinett – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig. Selected paintings and prints also provide insights into Beckmann's working process and the interplay of different media.

The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the sponsorship of Adolf Würth GmbH & Co. KG, the Dagmar-Westberg-Stiftung and the Städtischer Museums-Verein. Additional support has been provided by the Franz Dieter und Michaela Kaldewei Kulturstiftung and Dr Ina Petzschke-Lauermann.

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Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum, on the exhibition: “Max Beckmann, the Städel Museum and the city of Frankfurt am Main have been closely linked for over a century. Despite the loss of almost all of the artist’s works in its holdings during the Nazi era, the museum now boasts a Beckmann collection of international standing. With the current exhibition, we are focusing specifically on Beckmann’s drawings for the first time in over forty years. They open up a fascinating cosmos of his work and make his artistic development immediately tangible—not least thanks to the outstanding collaboration with Hedda Finke and Stephan von Wiese, the editors of the three-volume catalogue raisonné of his drawings.”

Daniel Hoster, Chairman of the Dagmar-Westberg-Stiftung: “With our founder’s view of Max Beckmann in mind, the following quote from his diary entry on 18 December 1940 serves as an inspiring reminder for our own time: ‘The role you’re playing at the present moment is the most difficult, but also the most magnificent your life was able to offer you – don’t forget that – Max Beckmann – and exactly as it is.’ In keeping with our founder’s close ties to the Städel Museum, we are therefore delighted to support the exhibition of Beckmann’s drawings. It offers a new perspective on one of the most important German artists of the first half of the twentieth century—as well as on a body of work that has lost none of its relevance to this day.”

The curators **Regina Freyberger, Head of Prints and Drawings after 1800 at the Städel Museum, Hedda Finke and Stephan von Wiese, authors of the three-volume catalogue raisonné of Beckmann’s drawings**, add: “The drawings are a key to Beckmann’s work. Through drawing, he developed his unmistakable visual language, captured what he saw and experienced, shaped his personal worldview and transformed fleeting impressions into multi-layered, meaningful compositions. In the course of his life, he produced more than 1,900 black-and-white drawings in pen, chalk or pencil, not bound in sketchbooks—ranging from quick sketches to autonomous images. The exhibition presents a concentrated and representative selection of these works, which—supplemented by individual colour works, prints and paintings—allow visitors to experience the intensity of Max Beckmann’s drawing.”

Tour of the Exhibition

In six chapters, the exhibition traces Beckmann’s independent artistic development from his early years in Berlin to the final years of his life in the United States. In addition, a selection of prints is on display in a separate cabinet adjacent to the Beckmann Hall in the permanent exhibition of modern art.

Beginnings in Berlin

Max Beckmann achieved his first artistic success at the 1906 Berlin Secession exhibition. Academically trained, he developed a style close to German Impressionism. This is exemplified by the soft hatching in the *Self-Portrait* from 1912 and in the atmospheric *Evening Street Scene* (1913?). In terms of content, he was attracted to the big themes: in monumental historical paintings with biblical, mythological or contemporary motifs, he addressed fundamental human conflicts, for example in the draft *Elephant Battle* (1908). With the advent of Expressionism and the growing critical response to his works, Beckmann began to focus more on personal experiences. This is evident in the sketches for *The Night* (1912), which capture scenes of violence that Beckmann presumably witnessed himself.

The Artist in the War

At the beginning of the First World War, Max Beckmann—like many artists of his generation—volunteered for medical service in the hope of gaining new inspiration for his work. His earlier, vividly composed works depicting the horrors of war in East Prussia were followed by increasingly reduced drawings in Flanders, which objectively and concisely capture the everyday life of soldiers, the suffering of the wounded and the destruction of war. Works such as *Wounded Soldier with Bandaged Head* (1915) show people in their vulnerability with quick, angular strokes, while *Dead Man Laid Out* (1915) has a powerful effect through its vivid imagery and strong perspective foreshortening. The two portraits, *Prof. Ferdinand Sauerbruch* (1915) and *Self-Portrait While Drawing* (1915), also reflect this formal change and already hint at the characteristic visual language of the coming years.

In December 1914, Beckmann made sketches for the painting *Resurrection* (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), which he began in Strasbourg in 1915 but never completed. This is the only oil painting that directly reflects Beckmann's experiences of the war. Far from any hope, the dead rise from their graves into a fragmented landscape. For the first time, the exhibition presents a large preparatory drawing for this key work, which was discovered a few years ago in Mathilde Q. Beckmann's estate during work on the catalogue raisonné.

"Base of Operations" in Frankfurt am Main

In 1915, Max Beckmann came to Frankfurt am Main and found refuge at Schweizer Straße 3 with his fellow student Ugi Battenberg and his wife Fridel, whom he captured in the intimate pen-and-ink drawing *The Lovers' Tryst* (1915). After his experiences in the First World War, a new visual language emerged in this protected environment. His compositions of this period are characterized by reduced, two-dimensional forms. Perspective distortions create movement and tension,

emphasizing the “grotesque”, as seen in *Three Spectators in Front of a Stage* (1917), for example. This change in style is particularly evident in the lithographic cycle *Hell* (1919), which is also one of Beckmann’s most socially critical works from his Frankfurt years. The exhibition features an early version, as well as the transfer drawing and lithograph of the penultimate sheet of this cycle. These works illustrate the close interaction between printmaking and drawing, as well as a connection to painting. A prime example of this is *Self-Portrait with Champagne Glass* (1919), a major work in the Städel collection in which Beckmann portrays himself as an observer of a world that has fallen apart. Beckmann’s drawings became increasingly autonomous, and in the late 1920s his formal language began to clarify, as seen in works such as *Mirror on an Easel* (1926), *Boy with Lobster* (1926) and *Quappi with Candle* (1928). This also applies to his largest landscape drawing, *Rimini* (1927), which was part of the first Beckmann collection at the Städel under director Georg Swarzenski until it was confiscated as “degenerate art”.

The Nazi Era: A Defining Break

When the National Socialists seized power in 1933, Max Beckmann lost his teaching position at the Frankfurt School of Arts and Crafts, now the Städelschule. His works were defamed as “degenerate”. He withdrew into his work and, in 1933, created a group of watercolours with very different motifs. The exhibition features *The Murder* (1933), *Brother and Sister* (1933/37) and *The Snake King and the Lobster Woman* (1933). They represent Beckmann’s work during these years and show the increasing mythologization and mysterious complexity of his compositions.

Exile in Amsterdam

Against the backdrop of threatening political developments, Max and Mathilde Q. Beckmann travelled to Amsterdam in 1937. Initially planned as a stopover on their way to Paris, their stay lasted almost ten years due to the outbreak of the Second World War. Beckmann experienced this time as exile, marked by existential fears and material insecurity. Commissioned by the Frankfurt patron Georg Hartmann, he created highly personal drawings for Goethe’s *Faust: The Second Part of the Tragedy*. They are among the most significant works of the Amsterdam period and formed the basis for Beckmann’s subsequent work as a draughtsman. In the 143 pen-and-ink drawings, four of which are on display in the exhibition, Beckmann dealt with far-reaching themes, including gender relations and the effects of war. He also created vividly composed works such as *Tram Stop* (1945), which reflect the experience of isolation and stagnation in exile, and *Champagne Fantasy (Magnifying Glass)* (1945), in which Beckmann transformed his favourite drink into a symbolic primordial soup of humanity in a surreal vision.

Fresh Start in the United States

In 1947–48, Max Beckmann made a new start in the United States. Unimpressed by the growing abstraction in contemporary art, he continued to strive for a legible interpretation of the world and remained formally committed to figuration. *Self-Portrait with Fish* (1949) and *Rodeo* (1949) are among the most impressive compositions that reflect Beckmann's engagement with his new living environment. The exhibition concludes with *Backstage* (1950), one of Beckmann's last unfinished paintings, and his last drawing, the *Portrait of Georg Swarzenski* (1950). From 1918 onwards, Swarzenski had built up the important Beckmann collection at the Städel Museum, which still forms the basis for the ongoing research and presentation of his work today.

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Curators: Hedda Finke and Stephan von Wiese (catalogue raisonné of Max Beckmann's drawings), Regina Freyberger (Head of Prints and Drawings after 1800, Städel Museum)

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Information: www.staedelmuseum.de/en/

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Opening Hours: Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am–6 pm, Thur 10 am–9 pm

Special Opening Hours: For up-to-date information on special opening hours, please visit www.staedelmuseum.de/en/visit.

Tickets: Tue–Fri €16, reduced €14, Sat, Sun + holidays €18, reduced €16; every Tuesday from 3 pm €9; admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: €16 per person. Registration is generally required for all groups, by telephone +49 (0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de.

Audio Guide App: The approximately thirty-minute audio tour of the exhibition comprises fourteen stations and is available in German. The free app will be available for iOS and Android in the App Store and Google Play Store from the start of the exhibition and can be downloaded to your smartphone at home or via the museum's Wi-Fi.

Catalogue: To accompany the exhibition, Hirmer Verlag is publishing the catalogue *Beckmann. Zeichnungen / Beckmann. Drawings* in a German/English edition, edited by Hedda Finke, Regina Freyberger and Stephan von Wiese. The catalogue comprises 188 pages and costs €45 (bookshop edition) or €34.90 (museum edition).

Catalogue raisonné: After nine years of intensive research, the first two volumes of the three-volume catalogue raisonné of Max Beckmann's drawings, edited by Hedda Finke and Stephan von Wiese, will be published by Hirmer Verlag to coincide with the opening of the exhibition in early December. Until the publication of Volume III in spring 2026, the catalogue raisonné will be available at a subscription price of €420 (D) (instead of €500 (D)), plus postage, for all three volumes from Hirmer Verlag and bookshops. Volumes I and II will be delivered in early December 2025. Volume III will be delivered to subscribers at no additional charge in spring 2026. The volumes are not available individually.

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