

For the first time in our city, CaixaForum Barcelona gives spectators the chance to see an exhibition devoted to one of the most outstanding artists of the twentieth century

MAX BECKMANN

 Leipzig, 1884 —
Nueva York, 1950

Max Beckmann (Leipzig, 1884 – New York, 1950) an artist with an independent, solitary spirit, forged a wholly personal language built on a realism enriched by symbolic resonances. The result was a body of work that paid powerful testimony to the tumultuous society of his day. Now, for the first time in Barcelona, "la Caixa" presents an overview of this artist's work in *Max Beckmann. Leipzig, 1884 – New York, 1950*, an exhibition organised in cooperation with the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum. The show, which features a total of 49 works, mostly paintings but also a dozen lithographs and two sculptures, encompasses Beckmann's entire trajectory, from his early works as a young man in Germany to the painting he declared finished on the very day of his death in exile in the United States. The exhibition is divided into two sections. The first presents the most important pieces from the artist's years in German. The second, devoted to the periods in Amsterdam and the United States, is structured around four metaphors or rhetorical figures related to the experience of exile, which this artist saw as the existential condition of modern men and women.

Max Beckmann. Leipzig, 1884 - New York, 1950. Organisation: An exhibition organised by "la Caixa" in cooperation with the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum. **Curator:** Tomàs Llorens, specialist in twentieth-century art. **Place:** CaixaForum Barcelona (Av. de Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8). **Dates:** From 21 February to 26 May 2019.

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Barcelona, 20 February 2019. Elisa Durán, Deputy General Director of "la Caixa" Banking Foundation, Valentí Farràs, Director of CaixaForum Barcelona, and Tomàs Llorens, specialist in twentieth-century art and former director of IVAM, MNCARS and the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, today presented the exhibition *Max Beckmann. Leipzig, 1884 – New York, 1950*.

The show presented at CaixaForum Barcelona was organised in cooperation with the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum. The two institutions have been close partners in recent years, and the results of this cooperation include such exhibitions as the retrospective devoted to Camille Pissarro and *A Thyssen Never Seen* at CaixaForum Barcelona.

In its exhibitions, "la Caixa" pays particular attention to art from the last two centuries and, above all, to outstanding works from the twentieth century. As far back as 1982, the institution presented, at the Palau Macaya, a major show devoted to German Expressionism, a movement that influenced Max Beckmann in his early years. And, in more recent years, "la Caixa" has presented exhibitions exploring the work of key figures in twentieth-century art, such as Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dalí (and his *Atomic Leda*).



Max Beckmann, *Paris Society*, 1931. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Max Beckmann, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2019

To date, there have been few opportunities to see Beckmann's work in Spain. In fact, *Max Beckmann. Leipzig, 1884 - New York, 1950* is spectators' first chance to gain an overall vision of the German artist's career in Barcelona. The show opens at CaixaForum Barcelona after its presentation at the Thyssen Museum in Madrid.

Although influenced in his early years by Expressionism and New Objectivity, Max Beckmann (Leipzig, 1884 – New York, 1950) developed a highly independent, personal painting style, realist but full of symbolic resonances as he paid powerful testimony to the society of his time.

The exhibition, curated by Tomàs Llorens, features a total of 49 pieces (mainly painting, but also two sculptures and a portfolio of lithographs) from museums and collections around the world. The works include some of Beckmann's most

outstanding paintings, such as *Paris Society* (1931), *The Town (City Night)* (1950) and *The Argonauts* (1949-50), the triptych he finished on the very day of his premature death in New York.

Exile Figures

Beckmann's artistic career can be divided into three periods, each of a very different nature and duration.

The first covers the years before World War One and takes place mainly in Berlin. This was a time when the young artist's early public recognition would be curtailed by the war, for which he himself enlisted as a nurse.

The second begins at the end of the war and unfolds for the most part in Frankfurt, where Beckmann became a teacher at the local art school. Despite his early inclination towards Expressionism and, later, New Objectivity, Beckmann refused to join these movements officially, preferring to develop what was an increasingly independent, personal style of painting, realist yet richly imbued with symbolism, embodying powerful testimony to the society of his life and times. The climax of this second period was interrupted by the rise of Fascism and Hitler's coming to power in 1933. Beckmann was expelled from his teaching post and was no longer able to show his art in public. In 1937, some of his works featured prominently in the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* [Degenerate Art], organised by the Nazi government.

The third and final period in Beckmann's trajectory spans the years after he decided to abandon Germany, moving first to Amsterdam, although his intention was eventually to settle in Paris or the United States. However, this wish would not be fulfilled until after the war, when he received an invitation to teach at Washington University in Saint Louis and he moved to America in 1947. Beckmann died in New York in 1950 without ever having returned to Germany.

Following his life's journey chronologically, the exhibition is divided into two broad sections. The first, smaller in size, is devoted to the period in Germany, from the years leading up to the First World War, when Beckmann began to



Max Beckmann, *Carnival, Double Portrait*, 1925. Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf. © Museum Kunstpalast/ARTOTHEK. © Max Beckmann, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2019

gain public recognition, until the rise of Nazism in 1933, when he was dismissed from his post at Frankfurt Art School and was banned from showing his works in public. The main criteria behind the selection of the pieces in this section were representativeness and importance within the artist's production as a whole.

The second, larger section spans the years in Amsterdam (1937-1947) and the United States (1947-1950). In this case, the works were selected according to thematic criteria. Here, the accent is on exile, both literally, as experienced by Beckmann in his own life, and figuratively, reflected in his understanding of exile as the basic condition of human existence in general and of modern men and women in particular. For this reason, allegorical paintings – to which he devoted most of his efforts and time, for all the triptychs and large canvases that he painted are allegorical compositions, – make up the greater part of this selection. The portraits, landscapes and still life works, traditional genres that Beckmann also explored throughout his artistic career, were also selected for their allegorical resonances.

This second exhibition section is structured around four metaphors, all related to exile: "Masks", focusing on the loss of identity that exiles suffer; "Electric Babylon", meditations on the vertigo of the modern city as the capital of exile; "The Long Goodbye", exploring the equivalence between exile and death; and "The Sea,", as a metaphor for infinity; its seductive quality and the nostalgia it evokes.

Activities for all audiences

As usual, the exhibition is complemented by a catalogue, produced by "la Caixa" and the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, containing texts by Tomàs Llorens and an extensive chronology by Leticia de Cos.

Moreover, a programme of parallel activities with something for all audiences will include a lecture by the curator, guided tours for the general public and "coffee-debates". Particularly outstanding attractions also include the family space "Interiors", created especially for this show, and the guided tours for families under the title "Journey Around a Self-portrait".

EXHIBITION SECTIONS

1. A German painter in a bewildered Germany

The conviction that German art had its own personality, different from that of France or Italy, was deeply rooted among artists in Beckmann’s generation. This personality was expressed in a sensibility oriented more towards the “feeling of life” than ideal beauty, a trait that, repressed and blurred for centuries, was strongly revived in the modern era, running parallel to the economic and social resurgence of the German nation. However, as a result of the blow represented by First World War, confidence and self-esteem evaporated, giving way to a sharp crisis of consciousness in which Naturalism was replaced by Expressionism.

In his first period, Beckmann’s painting is eclectic in style. Besides the likes of Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth, it also calls to mind other German artists from the previous generation. However, Cézanne was undoubtedly the most important and longest-lasting influence on his work. The preoccupation with fusing representation of volumes onto the two-dimensional surface of the canvas would become a major obsession in Beckmann’s art throughout his career.



Max Beckmann, *Rugby Players*, 1929. Lehmbrock Museum, Duisburg. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Lehmbrock Museum, Duisburg; Photo: Bernd Kirtz. © Max Beckmann, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2019

Beckmann did not believe that a new painting based on new doctrinal principles could exist. The only new thing in art, in his view, was the new personalities of artists. His concern to link up with the great tradition of painting became a major goal in his work throughout this first period, a quest that led him into confrontation with avant-garde and Expressionist movements formed by artists of his generation. His profound rejection of the collective, sectarian and doctrinal nature of these movements would continue to fuel the individualist positions that Beckmann adopted in response to the collective artistic trends that he encountered throughout the course of his life.

In those early years of his career, Beckmann developed a new type of painting, realistic and “actual”, with which he achieved his first successes and began to be recognised in the artistic circles of the time. His consecration would be consolidated with his first solo exhibition, in 1913. That same year, he introduced a new theme into his painting: Berlin street scenes, evoking the metropolitan character of the big city. This was a theme that Expressionists and Futurists had made their own, but Beckmann took a very different approach to it, bringing an objective vision to bear and comparing the painter’s gaze to that of a witness fascinated by the agitation in what he saw.

The following years were marked by the experience of war. Like other German artists of his generation, Beckmann enlisted as a volunteer, not so much out of patriotism as in search of a life experience that would eventually turn into artistic learning. In 1915, after a temporary discharge from the army due to a nervous breakdown, he settled in Frankfurt, where he

remained until 1933. This was the beginning of a new life, both personal – his first marriage entered into crisis and he married Mathilde von Kaulbach, known as Quappi, in 1925 – and artistic, with his reputation fast growing.

“I believe that essentially I love painting so much because it forces me to be objective. There is nothing I hate more than sentimentality”, he wrote in 1918 in a text describing his creative principles. Rejection of sentimentality, objectivity, concentration on the aesthetic elements in the painting... Beckmann was the first artist to formulate the basic principles on which one of the dominant trends in post-First World War poetics is founded. Nevertheless, as soon as all this generated a fashionable new trend known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), of which he was considered the main exponent, our artist, ever averse to labels, ceased to use the expression.

Over the years marked by the rise of Nazism, Beckmann’s situation became increasingly difficult. He was a well-known public figure in Frankfurt and, although his painting clearly had German roots and his modernism was moderate in nature, his contacts with the Jewish elites militated against him. In 1933, seeking greater anonymity, he returned to Berlin. However, German galleries gradually ceased to show his work, and his income declined. On the very day that the *Degenerate Art* exhibition opened, Beckmann took a train to Amsterdam, never to return to his native Germany.

Following a chronological order, this first part of the exhibition presents the artist in all aspects of his production over the years before he went into exile. *The Street* (1914), *Self-portrait as a Clown* (1921), *Carnival, Double Portrait* (1925) and *Paris Society* (1931), together with two sculptures and a portfolio of lithographs, are among the most outstanding works in this first section.

2. Exit and beginning

“What I want to show in my work is the idea that hides itself behind so-called reality... Starting from the present, I seek the bridge that leads from the visible to the invisible...”

The most significant new development in Beckmann’s Berlin stage, which spanned the years from 1933 to 1937, was the appearance in his work of a new format: the triptych. Also adopted by other German painters during the interwar period, the triptych was, for him, a deliberate reference to German medieval art, linking twentieth-century German painting with its Gothic and Renaissance past. As a kind of painting intended for public consumption, the triptych replaced the vast salon painting of the nineteenth century. In the case of Beckmann, triptychs were also a way of linking up with the large-scale pictures he had painted in his youth. These are artworks that reflect a radical change, not only in his approach to his work, but also in his conception of the meaning of life and the destiny of humanity.

Allegories typically explore the visible, the sensory aspect of the world, in order to grasp the invisible. The main effect that exile had on Beckmann’s work was to intensify his painting of allegories, with the triptych becoming a prime exponent of that genre. The exhibition

features two of the ten triptychs that Beckmann painted over the course of his artistic career.

Masks

The first effect of exile is to call into question the natural identity of the exiled individual. Anyone who has been thrown out of their own home has also been deprived in some way of their identity. And their paradigm is the itinerant artist, the circus artiste or the cabaret performer, who don masks to perform before the audience. Or Carnival.



Max Beckmann, *Carnival*, 1943. University of Iowa Museum of Art, Stanley Museum of Art, Iowa. Adquisición, Mark Ranney Memorial Fund. © Mark Ranney Memorial Fund. © Max Beckmann, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2019

The triptych *Carnival* (1943), in which the artist is represented in the figure of the white Pierrot in the central panel; *Begin the Beguine* (1946), in which the festive atmosphere of the dance is disturbed by an air of latent menace; or *Masquerade* (1948), which features that same combination of the festive and the sinister and in which – as so often occurs – the fancy-dressed couple is formed by the artist and his second wife, Quappi. These are just three of the outstanding works in this section. Some of them, dating now to the relatively happy years of the artist’s sojourn in the United States, reveal to

the viewer that the allegorical nexus linking exile to disguise and to the more sinister aspect of the crisis of identity continues to subsist in Beckmann’s conscious mind.

Electric Babylon

The paradigmatic place of the loss of identity of modern man is the big city. Historically, the feeling is a phenomenon that emerged at around the turn of the twentieth century, but it has age-old precedents. The Bible describes the exile of the Jews in Babylon, a place where the divine essence that constituted the key to their identity as a people was erased due to their immersion among a multitude of false gods. Hence the title of this section, “Electric Babylon”, a reference to the modern metropolis where the boundaries between the rural and the urban, the natural and the artificial, day and night, are obliterated. A labyrinth crawling with hotels, bars, gaming rooms, dance halls, shows... offered, as a place of perdition, to the Prodigal Son of the Bible.

The city, the modern metrópolis where, in Beckmann’s words, “every single person is a unique event”, became one of the central concerns of turn-of-the-century German sociology. The transition from country to city is the quintessence of modernity, and the experience of that modernisation, traumatically culminated by the Great War and the destruction of hope, would mark Beckmann’s art. The metropolis is presented to the artist as spectacle and, among the different forms that it adopts, what most attracts him are the circus and the variety show. *Large Variety Show with Magician and Dancer* (1942) is the most spectacular of all the paintings he devoted to this theme. All is levity, confusion, fireworks, smoke and glittering sequins.

This section also includes several works painted in his final years, when he had fulfilled his dream of living in New York and was enjoying a period of great productivity and

professional success. *Plaza (Hotel Lobby)* and *The Town (City Night)*, both made in 1950, are the direct fruit of Beckmann's everyday life in the Big Apple where he witnessed, in his own words, the greatest "orchestra of humanity" on the face of the Earth.

The Long Goodbye

To leave is to die a little. Or a lot. In each parting, something is shattered forever. Exile is a figure of death and *vice versa*. Moreover, if Beckmann is an artist who from the very beginning interrogates himself about his German identity, in the new Germany shaped by the rise of National Socialism, the equivalence between exile and death was a reality.

Setting up home in Amsterdam after fleeing Germany, Max and Quappi had to learn to live in the anonymity of exile and with a future full of uncertainties. Once more, it was the beginning of a new life. Birth and death are the two great doorways of existence, the obverse and the reverse of the same reality, the same figure of exile. We are born as street artists, little knowing what fate will bring us. And we die as travellers, also ignorant of our end. Between one and the other is pure exile and, above all, pain. Life is torture, and no one can escape the force of destiny. Our main driving force through the long goodbye which is life is desire and its most explicit manifestation, sexual desire. The works that illustrate this section include *Large Still Life with Black Sculpture* and *The Mill* (1947).

The Sea

The sea is one of the main motifs in Beckmann's work. It is a symbol of travel and of exile, an immense mass in which nothing stays still. Its nature is a medium into which, like rivers, the existences of men empty and are purified and renewed. Pure destiny and pure threat. Pure destiny and pure menace. A seductive sparkle for the Argonauts and terminal blackness for Icarus. Seduction and threat.

The Transport of the Sphinxes (1945), one of his most enigmatic paintings, and *Falling Man* (1950), one of his most surprising, are among the outstanding works in this last section, which also closes the exhibition narrative with the triptych *The Argonauts*. Beckmann worked on this piece for more than a year and a half, and only informed Quappi that it was finished on 27 December 1950, the self-same day that, a little later, he would die of a heart attack. He had first painted the left-hand panel as an independent picture, which in his diary he called *The Painter and His Model*. Later, he completed the triptych by adding two more canvases, and began calling the work *The Artists*. Now, the left-hand panel was an allegory to painting, the right-hand panel a paean to music and the central panel a celebration of poetry. However, according to Quappi's account, a few days before completing the work, having dreamed of the Greek legend, he started using the title



Max Beckmann, *The Argonauts*, 1949-1950. National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. Donación de Mrs. Max Beckmann. © Max Beckmann, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2019

of *The Argonauts*, and this is when, perhaps, he added certain ancient attributes that appear in the work, such as the sword that the model is holding, and the sandals.

ACTIVITIES PARALLEL TO THE EXHIBITION

LECTURE BY THE CURATOR *BECKMANN. EXILE FIGURES*

Thursday, February 21, at 7 pm

By the exhibition curator, **Tomàs Llorens**, art historian, retired lecturer and cultural manager. Former director of the Valencia Institute of Modern Art (IVAM), the Reina Sofía National Museum Art Centre (MNCARS) and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum.

Price per person: €5

GUIDED TOURS

See website for times

Price per person: €4

TOURS WITH COFFEE-DEBATE

Tuesdays, at 4.30 pm

An unhurried tour to explore the themes or aspects that most interest the visitors, guided by a mediator. At the end of the tour, participants exchange opinions about the exhibition at a participatory discussion over a cup of coffee (or similar).

Price per person: €6

FAMILIA

+5 FAMILY AND EDUCATIONAL SPACE INTERIORS

This is a space within the exhibition, designed primarily for family audiences. Here, participants are invited to take part in an activity that encourages them to freely and creatively explore certain aspects of the exhibition. A chance to experiment with the representation of objects inspired by Max Beckmann's imagery and style in which participants create an image of an interior and give it added symbolic significance. In the activity, we explore perspective, points of view and different formats.

Admission free with the ticket to the exhibition.

+7 FAMILY VISIT

JOURNEY AROUND A SELF-PORTRAIT

How can we learn, through his works, what the painter Max Beckmann was really like? How does art explain an era, a life or a personality? Guided by a mediator, the family visit will focus particularly these questions as, with the aid of observation, materials and a participatory dynamic, we enter the world of this intense, unusual and enigmatic artist.

Activity recommended for families with children from 7 years of age.
See website for times. Price per person: €3

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