

The Museum of Modern Art

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PRESS PREVIEW:

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More than 200 paintings, drawings and prints by Max Beckmann (1884-1950), one of the major European painters of the 20th century, will be on view on two floors of The Museum of Modern Art from December 16 through January 31.

Directed by Peter Selz, Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum, in collaboration with Perry Rathbone of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harold Joachim of The Art Institute, Chicago, the exhibition will later travel to Hamburg and Frankfurt in Germany and conclude its 6,000 mile tour at the Tate Gallery in London. The works on view have been borrowed from 24 private collections and 23 museums in five countries, and include four of Beckmann's famous triptychs.

The retrospective traces Beckmann's career in Germany, Holland and the United States where he lived for three years before his death in New York in 1950. Included are examples of his early work when he was acclaimed as the "German Delacroix"; paintings from the '20s when he was a leader of the "new realism" movement, and outstanding examples from the last two decades of his life when his obsession with space, his love for color and his private mysterious symbolism culminated in paintings that rank among the most moving of our time.

"In contrast to the more subjective emotionalism of the German Expressionists," Peter Selz says, "Beckmann emphasized the palpable reality of the object in space. By endowing the dream with precise structure, he belongs to the mainstream of modernism which has its parallels in the writings of Kafka and Joyce, the paintings of de Chirico and Bacon and the films of Antonioni and Bergman. In the work of all these artists, the feeling of human estrangement is enhanced by the presence of hard physical reality."

Beckmann's paintings, Selz feels, are veiled in mystery and defy literal interpretation. "He gives himself and us just enough clues to arrest the mind and eye but never enough to unravel the mysterious thread. He rejects publically understood more...

allegories in favor of reality as we truly know it--filled with a multiplicity of possibilities."

The artist, whose primary involvement was with the formal values of painting, commented on his concern with space and color:

To transform three into two dimensions, is for me an experience full of magic in which I glimpse for a moment that fourth dimension which my whole being is seeking

and

Color, as the strange and magnificent expression of the inscrutable spectrum of Eternity, is beautiful and important to me as a painter; I use it to enrich the canvas and to probe more deeply into the object. Color also decided, to a certain extent, my spiritual outlook, but it is subordinated to light and, above all, to the treatment of form.

Born in Leipzig in 1884, Beckmann achieved an early phenomenal success, but experiences in World War I combined with a new interest in late Gothic painters such as Grünewald, radically altered his style and led him to an interpretation of a tragic world filled with energy and disquiet.

His emphasis on the importance of the visible object brought him into association with George Grosz and Otto Dix, whom he joined in the "New Objectivity" exhibition at Mannheim in 1925 which inaugurated the "new realism" movement that was to dominate German art and literature between the two wars.

With the accession of the Nazis to power in the '30s, Beckmann was dismissed from his teaching post. Following the opening of the infamous "Degenerate Art" exhibition in 1937 which included ten of his important paintings, he left Germany, never to return. The war years were spent in Amsterdam. In 1947, he came to the United States, where he taught and painted until his death.

In addition to 77 paintings and 41 drawings and watercolors, the exhibition includes 95 prints, almost one-third of Beckmann's entire output, which are on view in the Auditorium Gallery. Beckmann was disposed to working in series on broad themes related to man's life and his dreams, and outstanding examples from his Faces, Hell, Annual Fair, Berlin Journey, Day and Dream are stressed in the exhibition. His self-portraits, obsessive inquiries into his own identity over a period of more than four decades, dramatically reveal the development of his style.

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The first major monograph in English on Beckmann by Peter Selz has been published by the Museum in conjunction with the exhibition. It includes an essay on Beckmann's prints by Harold Joachim and a personal reminiscence by Perry T. Rathbone, now Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, who was instrumental in having the artist invited to this country in 1947.

The exhibition is presented under the sponsorship of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019. Circle 5-8900.