

For Max Beckmann, Art's Ironist, Crisis and Rediscovery

A real vigor emerges in this exhibition at the Neue Galerie, which focuses on the painter's unflinching Weimar scenes.



By Jason Farago

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Before the war (the First World War, I mean; with so many wars one can lose count), Max Beckmann was painting clean, traditionalist self-portraits and lush pictures of bathers by the sea. He was a neoconservative with no time for Matisse or Picasso, and certainly no interest in the coming of abstraction. Then, when the war broke out, the artist volunteered for the medical corps of the Imperial German Army. He got posted to Flanders, where he witnessed the murderous, meaningless second Battle of Ypres. He sketched the Belgian landscape, and the doctors and orderlies.

A war offers no exceptions for those with an artistic temperament, and painters would fight, and die, for both the Allies and the Axis. Otto Dix, Beckmann's fellow ironist, enlisted at once and served in the artillery corps. Franz Marc, whose expressionist paintings Beckmann always disliked, joined the cavalry, painted military camouflage, and died at Verdun. The painter Umberto Boccioni and the poet Wilfred Owen, on the other side of the front lines, would also not live to see the armistice.

"I have been drawing," Beckmann wrote to his wife one evening, after a day caring for men who'd survived the trenches. "That protects one from death and danger." It was wishful thinking. Though he never served at the front, Beckmann had a nervous breakdown by the end of 1915. The war went on, but Beckmann, now in Frankfurt, began painting biblical scenes with nightmarish directness: a sharp-angled "Descent from the Cross," a color-starved "Christ and the Sinner," crushed into tight spaces, sapped of all his early emotion. By 1918 it would all be over. A revolution would come to Germany, as it had already come to Beckmann's easel.

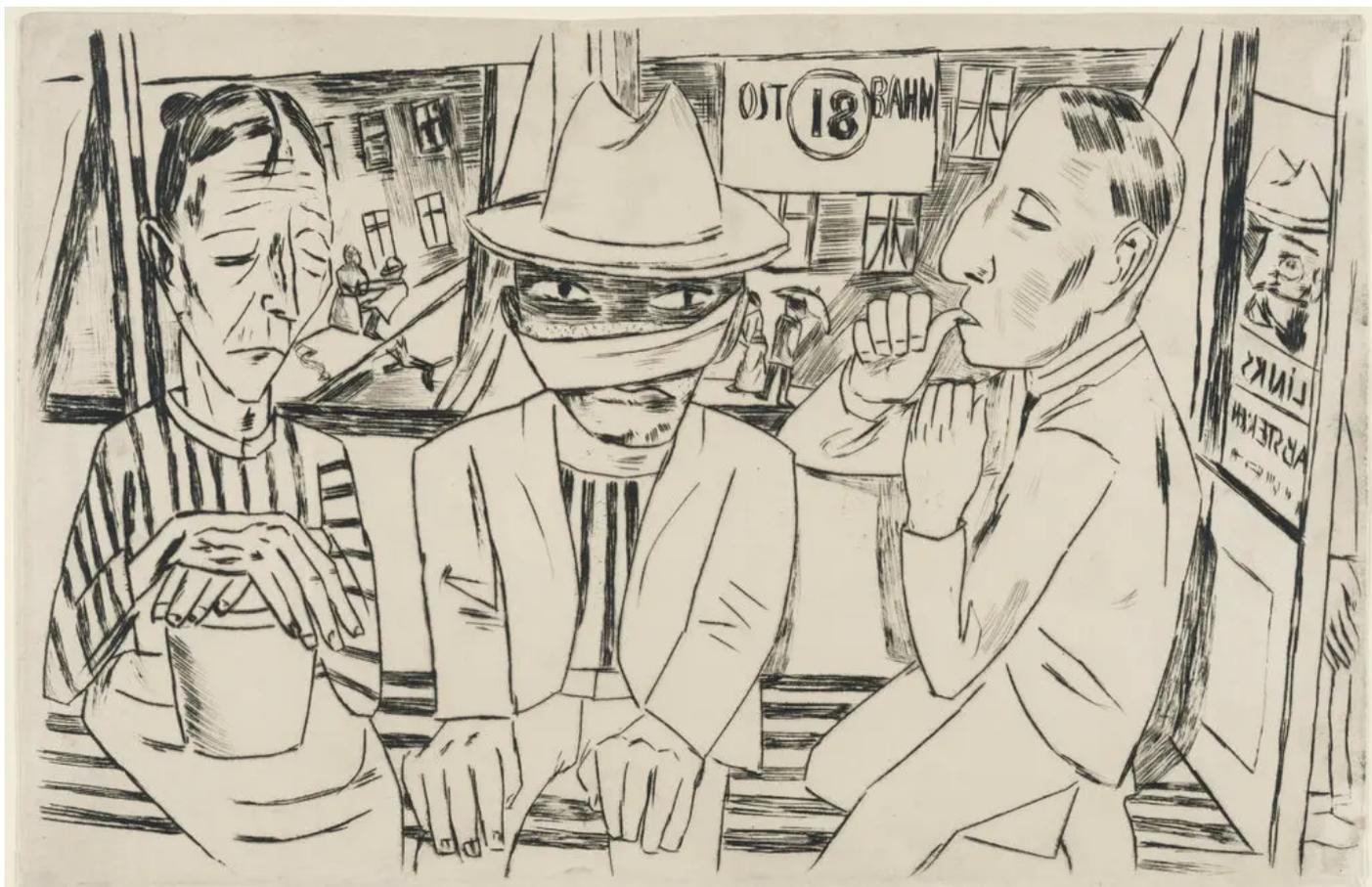
Three color-starved wartime pictures sit at the opening of "Max Beckmann: The Formative Years, 1915-1925," a concentrated dose of alienated modernism now at the Neue Galerie. The artist has always been well-represented in this city's museums — a full MoMA retrospective in 2003, a smaller one at the Met in 2016-17, and prime positions in Weimar politics-and-parties shows like the Met's 2006 "Glitter and Doom" — in part because Beckmann was an adopted New Yorker. Condemned by the Third Reich as a "degenerate" artist, he spent his later life in the Netherlands and eventually the United States.



Max Beckmann, "Paris Society," which he began in 1925 and reworked in 1931 and again in 1947. The show reveals how the expressionism of the early 1900s would be distilled into the hard-boiled objectivity of the Weimar years. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

This new show, however, zooms in on what he made in his 30s, before the Nazis came to power. It's a show about crisis and rediscovery, and about how the romantic and expressionistic aspirations (or pretensions) of the early 1900s would be distilled into the hard-boiled objectivity of the Weimar years. The midcareer focus is tight, maybe a little too tight; I wished for a few very early works, and many more of Beckmann's wartime drawings, to illustrate the scale of his break with the past. Several of the paintings, including two self-portraits and the cold cafe scene "Paris Society," appeared in exhibitions at this very museum just a few years back.

Yet a real vigor emerges in this show — curated by the historian Olaf Peters, who also put together the Neue's impressive exhibitions on Weimar Berlin and on painting and politics in the 1930s — as it moves from the war years (staged in a prologue on the second floor) into the 1920s (in the main exhibition galleries on the third). In small woodcuts and drypoint etchings of the early 1920s, the shallow spaces and hard angles Beckmann initially applied to Christian motifs get redeployed for portraits, party scenes and acid views of Weimar society. Look at "In the Tram," a Berlin public transport etching from 1922 and one of many scenes Beckmann made of departures and arrivals. A woman at left crosses her bony hands. A grown man at right is sucking his thumb. At center is a war veteran, whose low-slung homburg casts a shadow over his heavy eyes: a dark band that contrasts with the white gauze wrapping his absent nose.



Max Beckmann, "In the Tram," a Berlin public transport scene from 1922. The shallow spaces and hard angles Beckmann initially applied to Christian motifs get reapplied to acid views of Weimar society. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Drypoint Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Unlike Dix, who was awarded the Iron Cross for his frontline service, Beckmann did not depict the war head-on. He preferred satire, effrontery, and a certain artistic sacerdotalism, especially in his portfolio of 10 dense lithographs with the memorable title "Hell." It dates from 1919, when Berlin was still in a state of post-revolutionary violence (that's why the new national assembly had to meet in Weimar). Dancers in a nightclub become gunners in the street. Torturers, dressed both in working-class rags and rich men's finery, rampage through a family's house. Under a lamppost we see Beckmann himself, unmistakable with his sharp jaw and bowler hat, gripping the arm of a fellow veteran whose sunken eye and cross-hatched left cheek suggest a brutal mutilation.

The real hell, for Beckmann, was the one to which survivors were condemned — and the Neue Galerie is displaying not just the full portfolio (though some sheets are hard to see high over the fireplace) but also preliminary drawings, including an extraordinary cartoon of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, her arms outstretched like in that earlier "Descent from the Cross."



Paintings influenced by Christian iconography in “Max Beckmann: The Formative Years, 1915-1925.” From left, “Descent From the Cross,” an unflinching look at suffering; “Adam and Eve” (1917); “Christ and the Sinner” (1917). Annie Schlechter/Neue Galerie

The imbalance and precarity that Beckmann pictured in the “Hell” portfolio recurs, more literally and comically, in an awkward series of narrow vertical-format paintings of circus performers and funfair revelers. “Carnival” (1920), inspired by a famous German altarpiece, imagines two of the artist’s friends in commedia dell’arte costume, while on the floor a man in a monkey mask grasps a trumpet with his feet. (In this show’s catalog, Peters identifies the masked figure as Beckmann himself.)

In “The Trapeze” (1923), a tangle of bodies with hints of Léger, no fewer than seven acrobats crowd one another’s motions, tumbling one over the other in a hopelessly failed circus act. Scrunched tight against the picture plane, like butterflies under glass, these aerialists and saltimbanques only wink at the upheavals and uncertainties Beckmann depicted in the “Hell” series. But they do suggest the way to the major achievements of Beckmann’s later career — above all “Departure,” his triptych of sailing noblemen and bound prisoners, which you can go see at MoMA.



Beckmann's "Trapeze," 1923, shows acrobats tumbling one over the other in a hopelessly failed circus act. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Toledo Museum of Art

I've never had a great passion for Beckmann's carnival and variety-show pictures. They're too eccentric for me, too illustrative, and, what can I say, I prefer a dirty Berlin nightclub to a day at the circus. The more urgent paintings and prints here are those that hold fast to the greatest virtue of German art of the years after World War I: *Sachlichkeit*, or "objectivity," a view of society purged of emotion, which saw the substance of things on their surfaces. That sober and analytical gaze — a "naturalism against one's own self," as Beckmann put it in 1917 — was an artistic project born from disastrous war and political disenchantment, and what its practitioners understood was that theirs was not a time for dreaming. The time had come to look hard, and get real.

Max Beckmann: The Formative Years, 1915-1925

Through Jan. 15 at the Neue Galerie, 1048 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-628-6200, neuegalerie.org.

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