

### 55.27a-c Blind Man's Buff (55.27a-c) conservation gallery talk, Nov 19, 2013

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### 55.27a-c BLIND MAN'S BUFF, 1945; Max Beckmann (German, 1884-1950) (Beckmann's seventh triptych)



**Erika:** Max Beckmann quote "I am certain that it is going to be my most outstanding painting."

Took 13 months to complete; began in Sept. 1944

This is one of nine triptychs; ours is the largest.

Beckmann painted this after his art had already been labeled degenerative art.

- In 1933 Beckmann was dismissed from his teaching position at the Stadel Schule.
- Beckmann's art was included in three Schandausstellungen (Exhibitions of Shame) in 1933, and in 1937 ten paintings of Beckmann's are included in the Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) in Munich.
- Within the framework of the "degenerate art" campaign, a total of 590 of Beckmann's works, including 28 paintings, are confiscated from German museums. A portion of these works is allowed to be sold to a small group of art dealers; some are quietly resold to collectors, others are sent to Curt Valentin, Beckmann's art dealer in New York.

### Third Reich, Move to Amsterdam, Daily Life:

1937: Beckmann and his (second) wife, Quappi (real name: Mathilde von Kaulbach, a musician) left Germany the day after the Degenerative Art exhibit had opened and he heard Hitler's radio speech (7/18/1937) on "Degenerative Art", never to return to Germany again.

(note: The auction of Beckmann's Lion Tamer was the clue that led to the recent discovery of more than 1,500 works confiscated by the Nazis or sold cheaply by owners desperate to flee Hitler.)

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/05/arts/design/trove-of-apparently-nazi-looted-art-found-in-munich-apartment.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/05/arts/design/trove-of-apparently-nazi-looted-art-found-in-munich-apartment.html?_r=0)

Beckmann moved to Amsterdam, took a two-room apartment in the tobacco district which bordered a neighborhood of the Jewish quarter. He witnessed many deportations in the Jewish Quarter and strolled often through these desolate quarters.

He was suspect by both the German and the Dutch governments. Anyone who left the Third Reich was suspect by the Germans and as a “degenerate artist” he lived under threat of seizure. The Dutch kept tabs on him because he was a German suspect. He was both in exile and under watch.

He was a voracious journal keeper keeping lists of words, list of works salable to American collectors, and sketches. His journals also showed a lighter side of his personality. He loved chocolate, wine and cigarettes. He and Quappi had a dog named Butchy who they absolutely loved. Beckmann would write how the dog freaked out during the fireworks on New Year’s Eve. (There is a photo of him holding Butchy like a loved one from when he was in St. Louis; can’t yet locate, but....)



**Still Life with Roses and Butchy (Stillben mit Roten Rosen und Butchy, 1942)**

From 1937-1947 Beckmann painted on the third floor in a very confined space. He lived an unhappy existence: circumstances, suffering, unmet wants and needs.

When the Germans first occupied Holland there were fires and toilets overflowing everywhere as people were trying to get rid of documents. One needed to conceal everything; even Beckmann's small journal was tiny, just slightly larger than the photo of it on the wall in the gallery.

When living in Holland, the Gestapo stopped him twice: once to try and conscript him and even though the Germans were taking young boys to quite old men, Beckmann's poor heart and age at this time (age 60) prevented them from taking him.

Even though the Beckmann's only survived by selling their belongings and an occasional painting on the underground market, they would often bring children into their home to feed them dinner.

Erika: "He's a history painter at a time when history is unspeakable."

1947 Beckmann was invited to teach at the School of Fine Arts at Washington University in St. Louis to fill in for Philip Guston. He had wanted to travel to the U.S., but his visa requests kept getting denied. He finally obtained a visa, stayed in NYC for two days, and then went to St. Louis knowing he eventually wanted to return to NYC. Because Beckmann's limited English, his wife sat out in the hall and translated for him during his classes.

Beckmann got his chance to return to NYC and in 1949 went to teach at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. He was granted U.S. citizenship, lived on the upper west side in NY, and was walking to see an exhibition of his paintings at MOMA when he died on the street at 68<sup>th</sup> and Central Park West of a heart attack on December 27, 1950.

### **Blind Man's Buff:**

(note: the game in Europe is Buff, as is the name of our painting, not Bluff)

September 20, 1944 journal entry states Beckmann began our painting. He began with the two outer panels first, moving to the middle panel in March, 1945.

After five name changes, he only decided on Blind Man's Buff on August 7, 1945, just a couple of months before he finished painting (Sept. 19, 1945).

Ours is the only triptych where the three paintings are one continuous space; the nightclub scene is in full swing.

Beckmann used the small bellboy figure (right panel) thirteen different times as a symbol of fate, here pointing the way to the blind folded man while holding the sign "Grosse Bar".

Beckmann didn't paint works to be puzzled out. He wanted the viewer to understand myth, history, the forces of human nature, the theme of human destiny.

The man would meet up the woman at some point. When his wife asked Beckman will they ever meet? Max said, "perhaps; - let us hope it." But do they know each other? "Of course not. Not yet." (quotes from letter from Quappi to Richard Davis, then Director of the MIA dated 8/2/1954.)

Other quotes from the same letter:

"The side panels are meant as worldly enjoyments, activities and behaviors of those people, who look only for the satisfaction of their sense-organs, ....except for the kneeling woman and the blindfolded man seeking their destiny..., finding each other."

"The center panel represents the Art: music, music in itself as well performed, Art (every Art) as a gift of God and also Art as one of His Manifold expressions. Therefore he called those figures "the gods".

"What Perry (Rathbone, St Louis Catalogue) said is also true and Max agreed. The passion of man with the horsehead mask for the beauty in her ermine cape – a variation of Jupiter and Venus."

He painted by candlelight. (The MIA has made a film of the painting under candlelight for social media)

There are no charcoal under-drawings under the paint. Beckmann did make a few preparatory drawings, but they are mere gestural. This is genius; this painting was painted directly on the canvas. (Joan)

The only reworking of imagery was the nose on the minotaur was lengthened. (Joan)

These paintings are on linen. (the support of choice until the late 1950s-60s when cotton became popular.) Linen is "tough as nails", ages well, comes in different weights from nubby to smooth. Linen has always been manufactured in wide widths (12 feet wide since the late 19<sup>th</sup> c.) (Joan)

Beckmann did not mix his own paints, but used paint from tubes. He may have used retouching varnish mixed into the paint to vary it. (Joan)

(The crackle in the Kirchner is the result of bad paint: he put "fat over lean" or didn't allow it to dry correctly before layering on more paint. Either of these cause alligatoring.)

He finished BMB in Amsterdam, during the 1944-1945 Dutch Hunger Winter as 20,000 died. The Dutch thought that the allies would be bringing food to Holland during this winter, but the allies went instead to Normandy. During that winter the Germans cut off all supplies; people ate their pets (not Butchy), zoo animals; trees were cut down in the parks for fuel.

When the allies freed the Dutch, his son (from the first marriage) notified Beckman that shipping could resume and may have helped contact Beckmann's art dealer, Kurt Valentin, who had relocated to NY.

Our painting was shipped in 1947 to NYC and immediately was shown at an exhibition @ MOMA for two months. The painting was sold in NY to Donald and Ella Winston who held it until they gifted it to the MIA in 1955.

Vicky Davis had convinced the Winstons to buy Otto Dix's Little Girl (75.72.3) (which used to hang in their bedroom in their Palm Springs home) and Beckmann's Blind Man's Buff to build their modern collection.

**Joan/Conservation:** (Note: There is much more detailed conservation information on our website and on the gallery wall panels.)

Joan Gorman, Senior Paintings Conservator, 25 years with the Midwest Art Conservation Center. (David has been there thirty years.) Midwest Art Conservation has been housed at the MIA since early 1970s. They do all the loan exams and cataloguing of the MIA's painting collection. MACC has 200 institutional members.

Joan worked for Dick Buck's lab (see below); she's professionally trained with a chemistry and physics background. She was a curator who wanted to get into conservation.

Today students have to work with a conservator for three years (a pre-program experience) just to apply for school. There are two programs that take ten students; another takes 3-4 students; it's insanely competitive and there aren't many jobs to be had.

Joan will be listening to Wagner and Verdi operas while she's working on the Beckmann. Note to docents: she's unable to hear when she's behind the glass.

<http://preserveart.org/>

Question: Why did Bank of America International Conservation Project grant (25K – Not to be revealed to the public) the MIA conservation money?

<http://museums.bankofamerica.com/arts/Conservation>

This painting needs conservation because it is so fragile it cannot even be loaned out. The large size gave BOA a big bang for their buck. And of course the fact that this is a masterwork.

Joan: “This is an undramatic restoration; it is subtle because it is structural treatment.”

(Joan says) We have no records of treatments done on this piece. The MACC has never treated it before. There was a master conservator before the creation of MACC by the name of Richard Buck, the founding member of modern art conservation and of a modern art conservation regional center and lab in Oberlin, OH. The MACC has surveyed the painting and said something was done to it in the 1950s, but Oberlin has no records of doing the work. (Online info states in 1958 it was varnished at in OH.) Regardless, someone varnished the painting.

The next step is What does the object tell us?

These pieces were removed from their original stretchers. Remember Beckmann was working in an attic in Amsterdam, when people were “eating zoo animals”, and certainly didn’t spend money on good stretchers. (The framework to which the canvas was attached.)

The three panels were heavily painted and were not well supported. Work done in the 1950s usually included lining the canvas with adhesive to another fabric. This was not done to BMB; hurrah! (If done, our canvas would not have retained its painterliness, how it appears. The brushstrokes and the painting would sink into the lining. “One would notice this from across the gallery.”)

What happened instead was the edges were lined or “strip lined”. Fabric was attached to tack margins which hold it to auxiliary support. They used polyvinyl acetate emulsion adhesive called hot melt (no longer used), Hot melt was new in the 1950s; there were many different grades based on the melting point. The polyvinyl acetate was heated and the strip was attached to the ledge lining. As it cools it becomes solid. (After reading the conservation report it may not have been this adhesive, but of a more “wax/resin mixture” as “it is thermoplastic when heated”.)

It was attached with staples to the style of stretcher that Dick Buck invented (wide redwood 1.25” thick X 4” wide) connected with aluminum and redwood bars with spring expansion. When our paintings were attached the restorers put too much torque so the edges are cracked.



All Steps of Restoration are on the website. Some to include:

1. Examination by Infrared Reflectography and Photographs made.
2. Loose paint, insecure paint and ground, will be consolidated with a thermoplastic synthetic resin adhesive. Joan will also consolidate the cracks with an injection of adhesive as a preventative measure.
3. There is black edge on the paintings (self-adhesive cloth on edges) which will be removed. They extend approximately ¼” onto the surface of the painting on the top and sides and ramps around the back. This was originally to protect the edges from frame abrasion, but now is deteriorated. This tape and it’s “crummy adhesive” (highly acidic) will be removed. It comes off both gummy and as a black powdery mess. An everyday comparison is the original Scotch tape made out of the cellulose nitrate (now looks like yellow tape), which over time has cracked and the adhesive which stained whatever paper it was taped to. 3M has been remarkably great in adhesives since the 1990s.
4. The paintings cannot be aggressively cleaned because what was used to cover them in the 1950s is nonreversible. (A spray butyl methacrylate synthetic resin was applied, a type of varnish that cannot be removed) There will be a light cleaning.

\*\*Even though the paintings had a varnish applied, you can see the intentional variation in surface gloss quality which Beckmann played with. This was a very important part of his creative process. He adjusted the gloss by changing the amount of oil in his paint.

5. The backs will be cleaned with dry cleaning; the tacking edge will be evaluated; the tension on the stretchers will be adjusted.
6. Cosmetic inpainting to fill in any paint loss, abrasion or distracting cracks will be done with a non-discoloring putty to match the surrounding layers of paint.

On the inpainting cart there are mediums of synthetic resin which dried pigments will be mixed into. She will use her eye and years of experience to match the color. She will adjust the opacity and the surface gloss as needed. All inpainting stays within the confined of the lost area. Inpainting will hide the damage, but not distract your eye. It’s like a “small bit of faux finish.” Joan will match the tone, color, degree of gloss/matteness.

This (inpainting) is a skill based on forensics and science, but her hands, authority, minimum amount of intervention is also skill based.

Areas to look for inpainting on center panel from Condition Report:

- Loss or deep abrasion on the breast of the female figure at center in the upper portion of the painting (woman with the flute?).
- An area of loss on the blue dress of the female figure in the right half of the painting (harpist)

7. The paintings will have backing boards, as they had:

- to provide a bit more stability so the stretchers won't torque and
- to prevent the accumulation of dust on the back of the canvas and
- to provide a microclimate between the canvas and any environmental change which allows the canvas to acclimated from one temperature to another.

We now use felt, called a rebate, between the paintings and the front edges of the frames. The new stretchers will be made out of aluminum.

The paintings will go back in their original frames.

Restoration Tools: (there's a ton of info on the iPads in the gallery)

Blue metal box heats a spatula set at an exact temperature for setting down and lifting adhesives and/or paint.

Thermoplastic adhesive will be feed into the cracks with a tiny, tiny plastic applicator. It goes on as a liquid; dries as a hard gel; it can be reactivated with heat. There's a hot plate to heat the adhesive and hydrocarbon solvent.

The huge dual adjustable binocular microscope was designed by the German company, Zeiss. Originally designed for eye surgery, each optic and be individually adjusted to correct Joan's vision to 20-20. It has