

First exhibition to take an in-depth look at motifs of circuses and carnivals in Max Beckmann's work opens in Bremen



Max Beckmann, Actors, 1941/42. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017.

BREMEN.- Motifs from music halls, circuses, and carnivals of acrobats, clowns, and actors characterize the work of Max Beckmann from the early 1920s until his death in 1950. “Max Beckmann: The World as a Stage” at the Kunsthalle Bremen is the first exhibition to take an in-depth look at this aspect of Beckmann’s work. In this context, the artist is presented as a “theatre director, producer, and scene shifter” through his major paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and his dramatic texts. Among the loans from around the world are triptychs from American museums rarely seen in Europe. The exhibition was created in cooperation with the Museum Barberini, Potsdam.

Scenes from music halls and carnivals, acrobats, clowns, and actors are motifs that are repeatedly found in Max Beckmann’s work from the early 1920s to his death in 1950. They express his passion for all aspects of the stage during his lifetime. Beckmann had personal relationships to actors such as Heinrich George (known for his role in Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis*) and he created impressive likenesses of them. In addition to portraits of actors, his extensive repertoire of images from the world of the theatre includes backstage and onstage scenes. His depictions of artistic acts range from tightrope walkers and trapeze artists to circus animals. Beckmann also loved to attend masked balls and donned various costumes. He was especially drawn to the role of the clown as can be seen in the many likenesses of himself that he created wearing a clown costume. Pierrot and Harlequin, in their roles as critical observers and commentators on society, especially appealed to Beckmann as suitable role models, like they did to many other painters from Watteau to Goya to Picasso. Beckmann felt responsible to act as a reporter to his fellow citizens, pointing out social inequalities. In this manner, his works focusing on the world as a stage can also be interpreted as a political commentary on the time in which he lived.

World theatre: The idea of the world as a stage

Stephan Lackner, a journalist and friend of the painter who was the first to link Beckmann’s pictorial language with the term world theater in 1938, raised the artist’s ongoing interest in the world of the stage to the realm of philosophy. The idea of the ‘world as a stage’ which originated in classical antiquity remains in everyday usage today. It describes the world as a stage and all human actions as a play. Lackner used the term world theatre during a period of extensive insecurity and threat to the German cultural scene, which not only directly affected him but also his artist friend Beckmann, who had gone into exile the year before.

In 1938 in a text accompanying the London exhibition *Twentieth Century German Art*, Stephan Lackner described Beckmann’s paintings for the first time using the idea of world theatre. The exhibition was originally titled *Banned*

Art as a counter position to the Nazi propaganda exhibition Degenerate Art, which also showed works by Max Beckmann. Lackner's 'world-as-a-stage' characterization of Beckmann as a painter and "theatre director, producer, and scene shifter" promoted a key interpretation of the artist's work. The use of the term 'world theatre' was subsequently repeatedly associated with Beckmann. Max Beckman: The World as a Stage, however, is the first exhibition that takes an in-depth look at this subject and also examines cultural history issues and aesthetic reception and biographical aspects of the painter.

Apache Dance (1938) from the Kunsthalle Bremen collection

A classic example of Beckmann's idea of the world as a stage and thus a major work in the exhibition is the painting Apache Dance (1938) from the Kunsthalle Bremen's collection. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the French word "apaches" was used to describe shady gangs of young men, pimps, and criminals in Paris. This fringe culture was presented in the form of a demanding music hall dance number in bars and nightclubs such as the Moulin Rouge in Paris in the form. The dance depicts a passionate struggle between prostitutes and pimps.

Beckmann, who had numerous opportunities to see performances of apache dances, shows the climax of his dance in this painting: the dramatic and dangerous moment in which the male dancer grabs his female partner by the legs and throws her through the air above his head. The painting depicted a momentous contrast. While the performers in the center embody the passion and drama of the apache dance, the audience not only appears to be fashionably depreciatory but almost apathetic and indifferent. For the most part, the audience is not even looking at the stage.

In light of the dramatic developments in the political arena and the resulting insecurities that Beckmann was confronted with, it is possible that he created Apache Dance in 1938 as a symbol of current world events. The artist's emotions are tangible in this image; the international population apathetically takes note of the dramatic developments on the political, social, and artistic stage - but no one appears as though they were directly affected. The world-as-a-stage metaphor in Beckmann's art presents itself as a strategy to approach the world and the shocking changes going on in order to better understand and endure them. As the artist wrote in his diary on 12 September 1940: "If one can see all of this – the whole war, or one's whole life - as just a scene in the play of infinity, it is much easier to bear."

Max Beckmann and the exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bremen

The Kunsthalle Bremen holds major paintings by Max Beckmann, one of his few sculptures, and nearly all of his printed works. These outstanding holdings at the Kunsthalle Bremen were revised for the exhibition and have been placed in dialogue with major international loans, some of which are rarely seen in exhibitions.

Max Beckmann: The World as a Stage presents around 120 works from the period between 1920 and 1950.

These include two triptychs rarely seen in Europe: The Actors (1941/42) from the Fogg Museum and The Argonauts (1949/50) from the National Gallery of Art. In addition to the spectacular work Family Picture (1920) from the Museum of Modern Art, rarely shown works from international private collections and the print series Annual Fair (1921) and Trip to Berlin (1922) will be on display. Furthermore, the show will explore Beckmann's little known dramatic works, Ebber and The Hotel, which he created in the 1920s.