

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF



Max Beckmann
1945
Oil on Canvas
Acc: 57.27 a,b,c
G371

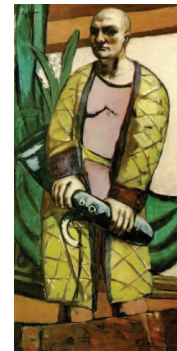
Blind Man's Bluff is the most important of the five triptychs created by Max Beckmann while exiled in Holland between 1937-1947—an exile necessitated by the Nazi's inclusion of ten of his works in their exhibition of "degenerate art" in 1937. Like much of his art, *Blind Man's Bluff* is allusive and symbolic, inviting explication yet resisting explicit interpretation. Yet, the artist's use of the three-paneled format that was traditional to Medieval and Renaissance altarpieces evokes religious associations. Beckmann also drew upon classical sources, calling the figures at center "the gods" and the animal-headed man the "minotaur". Throughout the triptych, figures engage in sensual pleasures in a place where time, represented by a clock without XII or I, has no beginning or end. In sharp contrast on each wing are the blindfolded man and kneeling woman who, like prayerful donors in a Renaissance altarpiece, turn their backs to the confusion behind them.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you see in this picture? What "stands out" to you?
2. Beckmann like to use contrasts, e.g. good vs. evil. What contrasts do you see in the triptych?
3. What do you think about the colors he used? What effect do they have on the painting?

KEY IDEAS

1. Max Beckmann (1884-1950) was born in Leipzig, Germany. He trained as an artist at the Art Academy of Weimar, but soon after graduation he moved to Berlin. By the 1920's he was one of Germany's foremost artists. His appearance was impressively masculine with a massive body and a powerful but sensitively sculptured head. His appearance belied his warm and gentle qualities.



Beckmann was known for his self-portraits which he painted throughout his life.

His art, too, appears blunt and aggressive but upon study reveal a profound and visionary mind with a painterly hand highly sensitive to surface texture and color relationships. Like Rembrandt, Goya, and Cezanne who he admired, Beckmann achieved full mastery of his craft later in life. He is considered one of the great German Expressionists although he others (Nolde and Kokokaska) rejected being compartmentalized as followers of any movement.

2. Between 1932 and 1950, Beckmann painted nine monumental triptychs which remain his most profound and complete artistic statements. *Blind Man's Bluff* was the seventh and painted in 1944-1945 while he was living in voluntary exile from Germany in Holland. The title of the work went through numerous name changes: *The Concert*, *Grand Café*, *Cabaret*, *Ox Fest*, and finally, *Blind Man's Bluff*. Some examples of his other triptychs are:



3. The triptych format was popularized in Europe during the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods for use as altarpieces. As in those triptychs, Beckmann presents complex figures filled with symbolic meaning, but his settings do not include a mystical world of saints and angels. Instead, he chooses scenes in contemporary hotels cafes and bars. This is not Christian iconography, but Beckmann's own religious philosophy as he attempts to understand the mystery behind human existence by penetrating deeply into the known world.
4. Beckmann fills his paintings with contrasts, opposites, and contradictions to point out that nothing is wholly good or wholly evil. *Blind Man's Bluff* appears to be Beckmann's plea for a healing reconciliation of the conflicting claims of man's dual nature. The central panel depicts a group Beckmann called the "gods" performing on musical instruments. He suggests a duality of opposites—vice and virtue, culture and barbarism (these suggestions continue on to the side panels, too). The young, naïve innocence of the couple on the outer panels conveys a contemporary theme and suggests the temptation of the innocents in the world. *Quote: "It is the dream of many to see only the white or truly beautiful, or the black, ugly and destructive. But I cannot help realizing both, for only in the two, only in black and in white, can I see God as a unity creating again and again a great and eternally changing terrestrial drama."*
5. Beckmann liked to use many themes and motifs in his paintings, some of which include:
 - Cafes and Bars are a place where illusion and reality clash, a place filled with both music and misery, a "place of dark and yet festive rooms".
 - Hotels serve as metaphor for the transience and arbitrariness of human existence (In *Blind Man's Bluff*, he uses the bellhop as a 20th century messenger of fate).
 - Women and Men are a central theme for Beckmann who suggests the opposition between them, being both destructive and essential to life, cannot be overcome. This conflict appears throughout his compositions.
 - The Candle represents the desire to find and understand one's self, but also illustrates the difficulty of doing so because of spiritual blindness and oppression.
 - Gods are both specific and generalized and used as a means to fuse cultures, mythologies, customs, and religions into his paintings. In *Blind Man's Bluff*, the gods and their music represent the vital mysteries of this world and another. However in the central panel they only produce dissonance by contrasting the animal, lustful, primitive side of human nature with the refined, cultural and controlled side. (Note the "minotaur" in *Blind Man* as a metaphor for this duality).

However, and most importantly, *Blind Man's Bluff* abounds in enigmatic metaphors that cannot be neatly interpreted. Its meanings changed even for

Beckmann as he painted and repainted parts of this triptych. For this reason, viewers are expected to have uniquely personal and intense insights into the work which are intended to expand its meaning and help it relate to the viewer's world.

6. Beckmann is a master in using the artist's techniques of color, composition, and spatial manipulation to emphasize contrasts and the ambiguous good and evil moods in this triptych.
 - Color contributes an alarming, uneasy mood to the work. The colors—even though festive—clash when used together and create tension. The panels are unified by the pervasive use of yellow and its contrasts with rich blue violet. Flat and modeled colors suggest the appearance of luminous stained glass. Light, through color, suggested to Beckmann the intangible and mysterious—the unknown.
 - Composition. There is no continuum between the three panels. All figures move, look, and gesture in all directions which contributes to a sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness. However, there are some superficial efforts to draw connections between the two side panels and give balance to the overall composition
 - Space. Space is often claustrophobic which increases its mystery. Note how the figures are constrained in space. This deep sense of proximity heightens the emotional distance of the figures.

Quote: I hardly need to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal I can only make it real by painting.



Acrobat, Oil on Canvas, 1943

Retrospectives:

- **Art Institute of Chicago, 1964**
- **Metropolitan Museum of Art 1964**
- **Guggenheim 1996**
- **St. Louis Museum of Art, 1998 (largest collection of Beckmann paintings)**
- **Centre Pompidou, 2002**
- **Tate Modern 2003**
- **Plus numerous other exhibits in major global cities**