

The Skaters



Artist: Max Beckmann (German, 1884-1950)

Date: 1932

Location: G371

Medium: Painting | Oil on canvas

Creation Place: Germany

Inscriptions: Signature and Date LL in black: [Beckmann 32] Labels on back in mylar.

Physical Description: German Expressionism. The picture encloses four figures in a tight, absurd configuration defined by a picture frame and a door frame. Two men dressed as harlequins raise a daringly balanced woman muffled up in winter attire. A waiter in tails with a tray full of champagne glasses slides between the figures. In the background is a broad sky, low-lying snow covered mountains, and two figures in a horse costume.

Accession Number: 61.36.20

Questions and Activities

- What words would you use to describe a skilled ice skater? Graceful? Elegant? How would you describe these figures?
- Why would the artist create such an unsteady scene?
- Beckmann felt that in life we are forced to perform for one another just as performers do in the circus. How is this attitude reflected in *The Skaters*? [The figures are not in a usual pose. They are performing an acrobatic stunt for us. The fact that the men wear clown costumes, not winter attire, also suggests that this might be a performance.]
- In *The Skaters*, Beckmann contained the figures with a door on the left and the flagpole on the right. What was he trying to tell us? How does it feel to be in a tight space? [Beckmann was expressing a feeling of being suffocated and lacking freedom in life.]
- How do the men and the woman in *The Skaters* depend upon each other? How do they put each other at risk?
- What do you see in this picture that helps establish the mood? [Line? Color? Space? Think about how Beckmann played with diagonal lines and the space around figures to create the mood.]

Key Points

Historical Background

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- In the first half of the twentieth century, Germany was profoundly affected by world wars. After World War I, the severe penalties placed on Germany by the Allies create harsh economic conditions that fueled the rise to power of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), who lead Germany into fascism and World War II in 1939. Hitler also headed a regime that orchestrated the Holocaust, a horrific legacy with which subsequent generations struggled to come to terms.
- Throughout the century, Germany was at the forefront of all fields of the arts. German artists engaged new conceptions of the inner self formulated by Sigmund Freud; at the same time, they responded to industrialization with programs for reforming the design and production of architecture and furnishings.
- In 1905, Die Brücke (The Bridge), was founded in Dresden by a group of painters and printmakers who contributed to the development of Expressionism, continuing there and in Berlin until 1913. Unlike the French avant-garde, Expressionists featured the artist's inner emotional state, focusing on the anxieties of modern life and taboo subjects such as sexuality, expressed in bright, unnatural colors and distorted forms.
- In 1911, Der Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group of avant-garde artists was founded in Munich and continued until 1914. The group was united, not by a single style or theme, but by a search for aesthetic forms through which to convey spiritual ideals.
- In 1916, the Dada movement began in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire—a gathering place for artists, performers, and intellectuals—and flourished in France, Switzerland, and Germany until about 1920. Appalled by the destruction of World War I and the nationalist and materialist values that produced it, Dadaists celebrated irrationality and anarchy in works of visual art and staged events.
- In 1925, Die Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) exhibition opened in Mannheim. The socially engaged movement was based on the use of stark realism to convey the sense of disillusionment engendered by the Great War and the failures of the Weimar Republic. Among the artists associated with the movement was Max Beckmann.
- In 1937, the National Socialist (Nazi) government organized the exhibition Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art), which included the work of many modernist artists. Opening in Munich, the exhibition was attended by literally millions of visitors in its dozen German and Austrian venues. The show included only a fraction of the 16,000 artworks confiscated from German museums by order of Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels; thousands of these works were burned, the rest auctioned off.
- In 1939, World War II began when German troops invaded Poland, and France and Britain declared war on Germany. In 1945, World War II ended with German surrender and the suicide of Adolf Hitler.

Biography

- Max Beckmann, the German painter, draftsman, printmaker, sculptor, and writer, was born on February 12, 1884, into a middle class family in Leipzig. His father was a flour merchant.
- By the age of 14, Max was painting seriously. He attended the Weimar Academy (1900-1903) and then went to Berlin to study. He was influenced by the German impressionism of Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth. In 1906, just before leaving for Italy on a scholarship, Beckmann married a fellow student.
- Back in Berlin, Beckmann visited the 1907 exhibition of Eugène Delacroix's paintings and produced a number of comparable large-scale works. He was also influenced by the monumental compositions of Peter Paul Rubens. Beckmann's works of this kind were very successful, and the "German Delacroix" had exhibitions in Frankfurt and Magdeburg in 1911-1912. By 1914, Beckmann had apparently become aware of a new tension of the picture space, but his color was still quite conservative.
- In 1914, Beckmann volunteered as a medical corpsman and was sent to the Russian front. In early 1915, he was transferred to a hospital in Flanders, where he daily experienced the horrors of operative procedures. By summer he was completely exhausted and was discharged from the army.
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- During the early 1920s, Beckmann played a leading role in Die Neue Sachlichkeit (the New Objectivity) movement, in which the artist depicted in the greatest detail and clarity his own emotions and the world around him without direct comment.
- In 1925, Beckmann became a professor at the Städel Institute in Frankfurt. He married Mathilde von Kaulbach.
- In 1928, there was an elaborate retrospective of Beckmann's work in Mannheim. Other exhibitions were held throughout Germany, with the National Gallery in Berlin dedicating a room to his paintings.
- During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Beckmann had a studio in Paris and spent the winters there.
- When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they dismissed Beckmann from his position at the Städel and listed him as a "degenerate" artist. He moved to Berlin, where he lived until 1937. His greatest achievements of this period were large-scale triptychs like the *Departure* (1932-1935), the first in a series that he continued to execute for the rest of his life.
- In 1937, the Beckmanns fled to Amsterdam, where they preferred to remain unnoticed and maintained contact with very few people. Beckmann's diary for this period is filled with references to the lack of heat, proper food, and light and to endless air raids. He continued to paint, and the great *Blind Man's Buff* triptych (1945) (MIA Accession # 55.27a-c) is one of the most elaborate and complex works of a period in which Beckmann did five of these magnificent and powerful poetic compositions.
- With the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945, Beckmann had an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The next year he had a major exhibition at the Curt Valentin gallery in New York City. In 1947, he accepted an invitation to teach at Washington University in St. Louis. The following year the City Art Museum of St. Louis gave him a retrospective, which brought him the highest acclaim in the art world. In 1949, Beckmann received first prize at the Carnegie International and taught at the Brooklyn Art Museum.
- The artist died on December 28, 1959 in Manhattan.

Style and Influences

- Unlike several of his avant-garde contemporaries, Beckmann rejected non-representational painting; instead, he took up and advanced the tradition of figurative painting. While he never considered himself to be part of any movement, he was revered as both an expressionist and as a member of Die Neue Sachlichkeit (the New Objectivity) movement, which arose in Germany in the early 1920s as an outgrowth of, and in opposition to, expressionism. (For an excellent discussion of Die Neue Sachlichkeit and how it compares to expressionism, see http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/neuesachlichkeit/arthistory_neuesachlichkeit.html.)
- He greatly admired Cézanne, but also Van Gogh, Blake, Rembrandt, Rubens and European artists of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance such as Piero della Francesca, Bosch, Bruegel and Matthias Grünewald.
- His style and method of composition are also rooted in the imagery of medieval stained glass.
- Encompassing portraiture, landscape, still life, mythology and the fantastic, his work created a very personal but authentic version of modernism, combining this with traditional plasticity. Beckmann reinvented the triptych and expanded this archetype of medieval painting into a looking glass of contemporary humanity.
- Beckmann's style in the immediate post-World War I period appears to have been affected primarily by German Gothic art. Its compressed space was well suited to his increasingly philosophical and poetic compositions. The powerful color and roughhewn forms of the Gothic also appealed to Beckmann.
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- His compositions, in 1920, were strongly defined within spaces confined by harsh lines of contour. His color was limited, symbolic in tonality, and quite cold. His principal subject, the human being, "the monster of vitality," was presented in nightmarish scenes of brutally raw living.
- As the memories of war and postwar began to fade, this nightmarish quality changed to one of dreamlike disillusion in his landscapes, his still lives, and in his portraits of bold or occasionally tender women. His enigmatic portraits of men, or of himself, are equally inscrutable.
- During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Beckmann's art took on a more mellow quality under the influence of contemporary French painting. Without losing any of its symbolic and poetic quality, his work became more distinctly esthetic under the influence of painters like Henri Matisse.
- The paintings from his final phase, after 1940, are freer and broader in style, simpler in expression, and more varied in their use of color. His subjects are mythical or allegorical and his motifs are symbolic. He expresses, with a force that is almost physical in impact, the problems of man's existence in a difficult world.
- For numerous quotes from the artist, see <http://www.quotes-famous-artists.org/max-beckmann-famous-quotes>.

The Painting

- This painting, executed in Saint Moritz, Switzerland, catches a moment when three acrobatic skaters pass between their audience and a waiter.
- The Gothic tradition in German art influenced Beckmann in his distortion of heads, feet, legs and arms, and in the monumental character of the figures.
- Many of Beckmann's artworks following the First World War contained scenes that were dark, violent and cynical. By the time Beckmann painted *The Skaters*, his subjects had lightened a bit. They still contained elements of pessimism and mystery, as we can see in the painting. Even though the subject matter of ice skaters is lighthearted, the dark lines and unusual configuration of the people create a puzzling scene.
- During the 1920s and early 1930s, Beckmann traveled frequently. For the 1931/32 New Year's holiday, he vacationed in Garmisch, a popular German resort known for its wintertime activities. Undoubtedly, ice-skating was one of many activities he witnessed during the holiday, and the inspiration for this painting.
- *The Skaters* portrays life as an uncertain balancing act.
- The skaters in this painting are far from elegant - they struggle just to keep balanced. Two men unsteadily lift a woman into the air. Her legs fly into the air as she leans on the men for support. The men totter on their skates under her weight, trying to stay upright. A waiter balances trays full of champagne glasses in the middle of the commotion.
- The artist emphasizes this unbalanced feeling with diagonal lines. Legs and arms, the trays of champagne glasses, and the skate blades all form slanted lines that make us feel that the group could topple at any moment. The sloping door on the left and the wobbly flagpole on the right echo this instability. Is anything in this world stable?
- Beckmann often included acrobats and other circus performers in his works of art to make a statement about man's unstable existence. In this work of art, the skaters' unsteady positions send the same message: life is uncertain.
- Beckmann repeated the themes seen in *The Skaters* throughout his career.
- Beckmann's works are frequently scenes of the stage, the circus, the carnival and the children's games. Beckmann saw these scenes as metaphors for life. At the circus, performers act foolishly for the enjoyment of others.
- Beginning in the 1920s, Beckmann created scenes that crowded people into tight spaces. Beckmann was sending a message about feeling suffocated and lacking freedom in life.
- Another major theme found in Beckmann's works is the relationship between men and women. He found this relationship to have areas of conflict, yet realized he couldn't live without it.
- Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr III wrote in the MIA Bulletin (1961):

Beckmann's search for the control of pure painting reached its culmination in *The Skaters*.

His work during the period 1923 to 1932 shows strong contrasts of light and dark, more simplified composition and a relaxed, expansive technique. ... Beckmann has "painted with abandon, for pure pleasure, without comment, implicit or explicit. . . [*The Skaters*] signalizes the accomplishment of the nine years that led up to it—the command of pure

more simplified composition and a relaxed, expansive technique. ... Beckmann has "painted with abandon, for pure pleasure, without comment, implicit or explicit. . . [The Skaters] signalizes the accomplishment of the nine years that led up to it—the command of pure painting. . . (It) heralds the artist's virtuosity as a colorist and as a brilliant manipulator of the brush." This new style epitomized "Beckmann's greatest contribution to modern art. . . which is . . . in his establishment of a new alliance and new balance of power between form and content, between wonder and reality." [Quotes from Perry T. Rathbone, Max Beckmann, 1948, City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1948]



Self Portrait of the Artist, 1919

Transition:

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