

Teacher and Group Leaders' Kit  
Information and practical ideas for group visits

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**TATE**

Max Beckmann

12 Feb – 15 May 2003

# Max Beckmann

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Exhibition guide

# 1. Introduction to the Exhibition

Welcome to Tate Modern and to the Max Beckmann exhibition.

Bringing together around 75 paintings, several sculptures and significant prints and drawings, the exhibition concentrates on three significant periods in Beckmann's life, 1918–23, 1927–32 and the late 1930s to the 1940s.

The exhibition is a collaboration between Tate Modern, London, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Musée Georges Pompidou, Paris. All three cities were significant to Beckmann. He visited Paris as a student, returning as a mature artist to test his work against his contemporaries who included artists such as Matisse and Rouault. His work was included in the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition organised by the Nazis in 1937 but soon after this he exhibited paintings in London. Whilst there he delivered a speech which clearly stated his belief in the right to artistic freedom.

New York was his final home, where he was able to exhibit and sell his work in the emerging central stage of the post-war art market.

Beckmann has been influential to art students and artists since the 1930s and his passionate figurative work exploring moral and social dilemmas have had a profound influence on many figurative artists including the American painter Philip Guston. Two contemporary artists who are aware of Beckmann's legacy in relation to their own practice, the American painter Leon Golub and the South African filmmaker/artist William Kentridge, have contributed essays in the accompanying Tate catalogue.

The physical nature of Max Beckmann's work, the quality of his printmaking, and the colour and techniques in his paintings, can only be appreciated by experiencing the artworks directly. We hope that you enjoy this chance to view his work at Tate Modern.

## Visiting the exhibition

Tickets are available in advance from Tate Ticketing, tel: 020 7887 3959, schools and group bookings line. Price for school groups – £4 per person.

Please ask Tate Ticketing when you book tickets if you would like to book lunch and locker space (there is a limited amount available).

As all exhibitions at Tate can be busy, please do not lecture to more than six students at a time. If you have a larger group we suggest that you divide into smaller groups and use some of the ideas and strategies we suggest in the kit.

## How to use this kit and structure your visit

This kit is a resource which aims to help you carry out a successful visit to the exhibition. It includes useful contextual information as well as work in focus and thematic cards to use with your students in the gallery or classroom. Although it is aimed primarily at teachers visiting the exhibition and planning work with school students, Tate Modern welcomes group leaders from adult education, community education and many other learning organisations across many varied disciplines. We have aimed to write this resource in a way that we hope will be useful to these wide audiences and do welcome your comments.

When visiting we suggest you introduce the exhibition to your group in one of the concourse spaces, the Turbine Hall or the Clore Education Centre (see the Tate plan, available throughout the gallery). The kit includes factual and contextual information to help create an introductory discussion about some of the issues which arise through Beckmann's work. Work in small groups when you are in the exhibition, using the thematic sheets to prepare work and discussion topics. You can reconvene later in one of the spaces suggested above to discuss the exhibition as a whole group.

It is worth ensuring that students do not feel they have to see every work in the entire exhibition, which is extensive and may be busy when you visit, but instead focus on specific works, chosen by you in relation to students' age and subject or project specialism. You can use the thematic sheets to focus your choice.

## Tate Modern's approach to learning

Tate Modern's approach to learning encourages students to think not of one correct reading or interpretation of an artwork, but of plural readings. These will be based on the evidence of the artwork itself as experienced by the individuals viewing it, and the awareness of the individual in noting their own responses. To construct meanings, therefore, the viewer needs to be aware of the experiences they bring to looking, as well as the information an artwork holds. This methodology underpins all our workshop, InSET and study day programmes here at Tate Modern. You will find examples of this in the kit and especially in the Work in Focus section.

## Reading list

- ***Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1930-45*, Hayward Gallery catalogue, 1995**

This is the catalogue to the excellent exhibition of the same name. This book is an outstanding resource for students across many disciplines as it contains essays from a range of historical, political and cultural commentators including Eric Hobsbawm, David Elliott and Dawn Ades. It is also extremely well illustrated with a very wide range of works from Germany, Italy and Russia.
- ***Max Beckmann*, catalogue of the Tate Modern exhibition, Tate Publishing, 2003**
- ***Max Beckmann: The Path to Myth*, Richard Spieler, Taschen, 2002**

A helpful analysis of Beckmann's key works, together with contextual information about his life and times.
- ***Beckmann 'Carnival'*, Sarah O'Brien Twohig, Tate Publishing, 1984**

Excellent analysis and detailed research into this key work, owned by Tate.
- ***Beckmann*, Stephan Lackner, Abrams, 1977**

Accessible, well-illustrated introduction to Beckmann, suitable for students 13 years upwards.
- ***Art In Theory 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell, 1992**

An excellent resource in every way, in this instance helpful in placing Beckmann in his wider cultural context. Contains Beckmann's 'Creative Credo' of 1918, written at the same time as the German Empire's defeat.

## 2. Max Beckman – Key Historical Context

### Where and when

Max Beckmann was born in Leipzig in 1884 and died in New York in 1950.

He wanted to paint from the earliest days as a child, studying first in Weimar and later in Berlin, then winning an art prize that allowed him to study in Florence.

From the beginning of his career Beckmann was influenced by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. He also paid close attention to the work of earlier European painters such as Breughel and Grünewald.

### Early career: First World War

During the First World War Beckmann volunteered as a medical orderly in a German field hospital, a traumatic and exhausting role for him.

He was released from the army in 1915, mentally and physically exhausted and on the edge of a breakdown, and moved to Frankfurt.

He regained his health from 1915–18. The experiences he had endured fundamentally influenced his style and the content of his art practice for the rest of his life.

### Mid-career: Rise and Fall

By 1924 Beckmann was sufficiently established in Germany for four leading critics to write a major book on his work.

Between 1925 and 1933 he was a tutor at an art school in Frankfurt and was lionised in professional German society as a successful cultural and intellectual figure.

By the late 1920s, Nazi sympathisers were appointed in many key art roles. This began with the appointment of Paul Schultze-Naumberg to the Weimar art school which had been the site of the iconic Bauhaus. Schultze-Naumberg was an enemy of all the Bauhaus represented and promptly dismissed the Faculty staff and painted over the Oskar Schlemmer mural on the building's stairwell. This marked the first official destruction of any public works of art by a member of the Nazi party.

In 1933 Beckmann was dismissed from his art school post in Frankfurt, along with four other teachers.

The 'Degenerate Art' exhibition was held by the Nazis in 1937. Included in the exhibition were works by Beckmann, Kathe Kollwitz, Emile Nolde and many others. They were shown alongside historical African sculptures and other works from the

considerable ethnographic collections held in Germany. These African works had been influential to the development of the German Expressionist sculptor Schmidt-Rottluff as well as many other European artists including Matisse and Picasso. Thus the exhibition displayed works, traditions and ideologies from people and cultures that National Socialism wished to exclude in its plans for the future.

In 1937 the Nazis also organised an inaugural 'Great German Art Exhibition' held in Munich in the first of Hitler's prestigious public buildings. Here the Aryan 'ideal' was portrayed through styles of Nazi realism and the classical Greek sculpture of Pallas Athene was displayed as the mentor for Third Reich art. This exhibition was to help with the Nazi agenda of establishing who was to be included in forming the new 'body of the nation'.

After the 1937 'Degenerate Art' exhibition, Beckmann left Germany for Holland and stayed there in exile, never to return to Germany again. However while in Holland he had exhibitions in London and was also able to visit London and France.

### Late career: America

In 1947 Beckmann was offered a teaching post in St. Louis, USA. Later he was made a permanent member of the teaching staff at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York.

He lived in America, again enjoying the acclaim of a successful artist, until his death in 1950.

# 3. An Art Historical Context

## Expressionism

Broadly speaking, Expressionism is a term which describes paintings which convey a sense of strong feeling or emotion. Although particularly manifest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, artists that are associated with this term exist over a broad timescale. Their work is typified by the use of distorted, exaggerated forms and heightened colour. It can be said to reflect the mind of the artist rather than showing images that conform to what we see in the external world.

Beckmann acknowledged the influence of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, whose use of colour and distortion is reflected in Beckmann's own construction of psychologically charged spaces.

Beckmann's passionate concern for humanity is often conveyed through strong narratives about social chaos and personal upheaval. His direct experience of the carnage of the First World War led him to research the depiction of human suffering in the work of earlier artists including Matthias Grünewald and Breughel, and to use his own lived, heard and felt experience.

Writing in May 1915, Beckmann commented:

'Every so often the thunder of cannon sounds in the distance. I sit alone, as I often do. Ugh, this unending void whose foreground we constantly have to fill with stuff of some sort in order to not to notice its horrifying depth. Whatever would we poor humans do if we did not create some such idea as nation, love, art with which to cover the black hole a little from time to time. This boundless forsaken eternity. This being alone.'

It was this aspect of Beckmann's personality – his consideration of Germany's situation and how he felt philosophically isolated and at times very lonely – that meant he did not align himself easily with larger movements. However, as mentioned above, he did acknowledge the value of many artists in contributing to his own artistic development.

Beckmann however is often associated with German Expressionism. Artists involved in groups related to this movement were Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Kathe Kollwitz and Oskar Kokoschka. However, Beckmann disliked the term 'Expressionism' and quarrelled with two of its earlier exponents, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc.

## Cubism

During the 1920s, when Beckman was at the height of his successful career in Germany, his work began to take on elements from Cubist artists such as Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger. Although by no means subscribing to their rigorous flattening of three-dimensional objects, he did begin to paint areas of flat colour more overtly. Beckmann was visiting France regularly at this time and would have been able to keep up with new developments in the city that took centre stage in the art world.

## New Objectivity

The German arts movement 'Neue Sachlichkeit' or New Objectivity, to which both Otto Dix and George Grosz contributed, saw the fragmentation of society and the social and economic collapse of Germany as being the basis for their work during this time. The exaggerated and distorted forms of Expressionism were replaced by a more gritty realism. Violent satire and at times an extreme misanthropy characterised these artists and again Max Beckmann is not a natural ally with such a group, though he is often seen as a founder of the movement. His work seems determined to hold on to a belief in the possibility of humanity and a precious vulnerability, as opposed to the, at times, vicious satire of evil by his contemporary, Otto Dix.

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# 4. Links across the Curriculum

In this section we explore how the work of Max Beckmann can be used as a starting point for studies across the curriculum.

## 1. History

The exhibition can be used to support studies of both World Wars in Europe. Beckmann's work is profoundly linked to his war-time experiences and can be used as source-material for the effects of war on the human psyche and on the lives of individuals. It can also complement investigations into the role of the National Socialist (NAZI) Party in Germany.

### Effects of War:

Many works in the exhibition can be used to support discussions on the effects of war, for example:

- See the thematic sheet on Self-Portraiture for information on four of Beckmann's self-portraits. Produced at four distinct periods during his life, these works give an insight into the effect war had on the artist personally. Use them to promote debate about how war can affect peoples' minds and lives.
- The thematic sheet on Beckmann, History and Society features a description and image of *The Night* (1918–19), made at the end of the First World War. Older students could use this image to support studies into the horrors experienced during wartime.
- *Prunier* (1944) is believed to show Beckmann's reflections on the privations the Second World War inflicted on the civilian population.

What do students believe his message to be?

*Beckmann is believed to have been commenting on the gluttony in a Parisian black-market restaurant while he was experiencing great hardship in Holland during the German occupation.*

How does he express his opinion visually?

If you didn't know the context would you still assume that this work was created in a time of unrest or national depression? *Students may wish to comment on the use of dark colours to lend a despairing mood to the work.*

Students could discuss this work in relation to what they know about rationing after the Second World War.

### Adolf Hitler and National Socialism:

The Nazi Party denounced Beckmann's art as 'degenerate'. During 1937, two exhibitions were held by the Party showing works that they condemned. These works didn't fit in with the Nazi ideal world view and in particular their 'Aryan ideal'. Artists such as Kathe Kollwitz, Emile Nolde and Beckmann, who used avant-garde styles, were considered 'degenerate'.

Students might like to discuss how that supports what they know about Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Useful dates in relation to the exhibition

1914	outbreak of First World War
1923	Hitler storms Beer Hall, proclaiming start of his 'National Republic'
1929	start of worldwide economic crisis, New York Stock Exchange crash
1933	Anti-Semitism in Berlin, storm troops picket Jewish shops
1937	Degenerate Art exhibition staged by Nazis in Munich, Hitler denounces the European art movements of Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism and Impressionism
1939	outbreak of Second World War
1942	the first Jews are deported to concentration camps, estimated 5.7 million Jews and 400,000 Gypsies are murdered by 1945

## 2. English

This exhibition has great scope for discursive and creative writing at all Key Stages. It can also be used to support KS3 & 4 studies of works of fiction by writers and poets after 1914.

### Writing to imagine and explore feelings:

- Students could choose one of the characters in *Carnival*. How do they think it would feel to be that character? Ask them to write an account of how they think that character came to be there, what they are thinking and what might happen next. *Note: There is an A4 image and much information about this work on the Work in Focus sheet.*

### Writing to persuade/argue:

All strands of the arts have been subject to censorship over the years. D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce are just two literary figures affected by censorship, supposedly for the greater good of society.

Despite being a successful, established artist, Max Beckmann's work came to be rejected by the ruling powers at that time.

- Use the evidence of Max Beckmann's experiences to lead into an investigation as to contemporary debates on censorship or acceptability in the arts. Students can write in defence of or against the work of a controversial contemporary artist (e.g. Eminem's lyrics, recent Turner Prize candidates).



**Writing to report/comment:**

- Ask students to choose one work from the period 1925–38 and give reasons why a dominant culture of National Socialism might have found Beckmann's work challenging and eventually banned. What are their views on this matter?
- Amnesty International has resources available for students on broad issues of censorship and often campaigns for the civil rights of artists, writers and musicians detained by repressive regimes. Students could investigate one cultural case and write an article in response to the case.

**Links with war-time writers:**

Example: Poets of the First World War

- Students could discuss how the work of English poets of the First World War support or contradict social comment made by Max Beckmann in his works.
- How do Wilfred Owen's poems, such as *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1919), *Strange Meeting* (1918) or *Exposure* (1918), compare to Max Beckmann's *The Night* or his *Hell Portfolio*, both from 1919. Do students feel that Wilfred Owen and Beckmann express similar feelings and evoke a similar mood in response to the First World War? Ask students to compare these artists' reflections on the horrors and desperation of war. *Note: The Night is reproduced in colour on the thematic sheet Beckmann, History and Society.*

### 3. Citizenship

Max Beckmann's work can be used to promote debate on ethical issues such as how people view conflict and the importance of freedom of speech.

**Exploration of conflict:**

- Beckmann's determination to explore conflict and inequality is a role many artists have taken, from the Spanish artist Francisco Goya to the contemporary South African artist William Kentridge (see his essay in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition). Ask students to find examples of other artists and through study of one or two of their works explain the artists' views on war. (Contemporary examples include British artist John Keane and Laurie Anderson, Nancy Spero, Brian Eno, Sean Penn, a few of the contemporary artists and musicians to express their opposition to the threat of US/UK war with Iraq.)
- What are students' opinions about celebrities expressing political opinions? Why might art galleries and record companies remain reticent in stating political opinions?

**Freedom of Speech:**

- Beckmann was one of the artists labelled as 'degenerate' by the Nazi regime. Ask students to discuss whether they think any forms of visual or verbal expression should be banned? Should people be allowed to express their opinions, no matter what those opinions might be? The Schools Programme at Tate Modern would be delighted to have views sent to us.

### Art and Design

The following are ideas for follow-up activities using the thematic sheets contained in this pack.

**Fragmentation:**

Max Beckmann's artworks are frequently made up of angular forms. Use the works in the exhibition or the colour images contained in this pack to talk to children about how images can be abstracted. Ask students to bring in a photograph or image of a group of people, objects or a landscape. Then ask them to experiment with producing an abstracted version of the image in collage, paint or lino-cut, perhaps by housing the figures within an angular tilting space, or breaking the work down into particular shapes, lines and forms.

How has this change altered how they view the image?

**Self-Portraits:**

Ask students to study Max Beckmann's self-portraits in the exhibition (*for information see the thematic sheet on Self-Portraits*). Make comments on how Beckmann uses elements such as line, colour, tone and expression to portray his state of mind.

Ask students to think of an emotion and create an image of themselves experiencing that emotion. They might express it through colour, marks and textures and/or expression. They could repeat the exercise with an opposing emotion and compare their two creations. How have they achieved the opposite effect? How do their works compare with those of Max Beckmann? Have they used the same or different methods to achieve their aims?

**Reflecting on Life:**

Ask students to consider the relationship between Max Beckmann's art and his life experiences. (*For information see the thematic sheet on Beckmann, History and Society*).

Ask pupils to discuss events that have affected their own lives or which concern them about the world today. Brainstorm a few words that they associate with that event or fear and then ask them to collect information about it. They could then produce an image portraying that concern. Ask them to think about how it can be best expressed in their work – perhaps through, colour, expression or fragmented forms.



# 5. Links with other Artists and Displays

Please note that the works on display in levels 3 and 5 change regularly so you should treat the ideas below as suggestions.

You can confirm exactly which works are on display by checking with staff in the Clore Information Room, (on level one, just off the Turbine Hall) or by calling the Information line on 020 7401 5120.

## Nude/Action/Body

- Compare the large black and white photographic prints, *Self-Portrait*, by John Coplans, a contemporary American photographer, with two of Beckmann's self-portraits.
- Works by women artists are not well represented at Tate Modern. However sculpture by Germaine Richier is on display in the Transfiguration room in the Body suite. She was French, and a contemporary of Beckmann. Consider how Richier has represented the effects and aftermath of the Second World War. Why might she have used the methods and styles she did? Compare her response to war with Beckmann's paintings he made after the First World War.
- Compare works by Beckmann with Kirchner's *Bathers at Moritzburg*, 1909/26 and Schmidt-Rottluff's *Woman with a Bag*, 1915, on display in the Myth of the Primitive room. These works are by German Expressionist painters and show their typical use of bold colour and exaggerated forms.

## History/Memory/Society

- Look at Rebecca Horn's *Concert for Anarchy*, 1990  
Horn is a contemporary German artist. Experience this artwork for at least 10-15 minutes and discuss why curators have chosen to display it in the History suite. It will help to discuss possible meanings of the title and how this could link with German history.  
Ask students to record their initial responses to the piece and then 10-15 minutes later, discuss how their views have changed.
- George Grosz's *Suicide* 1916 was also painted in response to the artist's experience of the First World War. How does this work compare to for example *The Night* by Beckmann?

## Landscape/Matter/Environment

- Other German artists whose work is concerned with ideas of German history and culture include Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. There are monographic rooms of works by both these artists in the Landscape suite. Compare their way of relating to national guilt in the aftermath of the Second World War to Beckmann's responses to the First and Second World Wars.

## Still Life/Object/Real Life

- The debate about what might be considered a 'degenerate' or perhaps more usually described as 'shocking' artwork still continues. Although today's world is undoubtedly more ready to accept a wide range of art than that of 1930s Germany, artists such as Sarah Lucas and Jake and Dinos Chapman, on display in the Still Life suite, have suffered various critiques of their work. How do contemporary debates about what is acceptable as art relate to debates that took place in Beckmann's lifetime?
- In the Modern Life room you will find works by Georges Braque and Picasso that explore a Cubist way of representing the world. Can you find any Beckmann paintings in the exhibition that come close to exploring similar ideas?
- Compare Beckmann's still-life paintings with works in the Memento Mori room.

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## 6. A Work in Focus – *Carnival* 1920 (Room 3)

### Ways of Looking

These approaches used for looking at art have been developed in the Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool teachers' kits. You will find an extended version of each approach in the Planning your Visit section of the Tate Modern Teachers' Kit, which is on sale in the Tate Modern shop.

You can adapt this sequence of activities and questions to most other works in the exhibition. You don't need a great deal of knowledge about the works because the questions will help students to work with you to create their own responses and to decide which aspects they need to research further. Prompts or suggested answers are in italics.

### A personal approach – what do I bring?

Give a quick one word response to the mood and atmosphere of this painting. *Likely responses might include cramped, squashed, clashing, distorted, unhappy.* Get the students to write down their word, for a later activity.

- How does the painting make you feel? Why?
- What does the work remind you of? Why?

### Looking at the object – what do I see?

What in the painting in terms of colour or line reinforces your interpretation of the emotion in the piece? *The way there is no horizontal line to the ceiling or window, the body language of the three figures, the clashing colours.*

- What is the work's scale? In what way would a smaller or larger scale affect the work's impact?
- How does the work relate to the others in the room? Is there for example a particular theme which ties them together, or have they all been made at around the same time?

### Looking at the subject – what is it about?

One of the figures is a portrait of the artist – which one do you think it is? Give reasons for your choice. *The small, masked figure at the bottom right is the artist. He is disguised as a clown and is wearing a monkey mask. Beckmann had recently been discharged from the German army after witnessing terrible events as a medical orderly during the carnage of the First World War. The other figures are portraits of two of his friends who looked after him during this time – Israel Neumann, Beckmann's art dealer and Fridel Battenberg, a pianist who provided him with housing, food and practical help following his departure from the German army.*

- Why might have Beckmann portrayed himself in this way?

*This figure relates to the Carnival character of the Clown or Fool through which Beckmann may be trying to make a comment on the madness of the post-war world.*

### Symbols

Some of the objects or imagery in this painting are symbols which may stand for something else. What symbols can you see in the painting and what do you think they might stand for? *Clearly the level of interpretation of the symbols will depend on age group but below are some possible examples:*

- The toppled and blown out candle – a frequent symbol used by Beckmann and many European painters for centuries to represent life and human frailty.
- The Fool or Clown – to indicate the world as a tragic place. (Shakespeare and Goya both used the role of the fool many times to explore social and political tensions in their work.)
- Musical instruments – to drive away disaster but also, in contrast, sometimes used by Beckmann to suggest evil magic (see *Beckmann, Carnival* by Sarah O'Brien Twohig, for a fuller exploration of this work and the role of symbolism.)
- This painting is seen by some as an allegory for the 'fall of man' with Beckmann's friends being Adam and Eve and Beckmann taking the role of the alienated man that has fallen from grace.
- What is your response to the title of the work? *Students may find inconsistencies with the celebratory aspect of the title and the imagery in the work, for example the falling candle or sad expressions of the characters.*

### Looking at the context – relating the work in the gallery to the outside world

What do we know about the time in which the work was made? *The German title of this work, 'Fastnacht', refers to the tradition in Catholic countries and regions of holding parties and fancy-dress processions between mid-January and the start of Lent. The season marked a period of fun and frivolity to contrast with the period of abstinence and withdrawal from human vanities which Catholicism traditionally demanded from believers during Lent. However 1920 was the only year Frankfurt police banned all carnival festivities, even refusing late night extensions in bars and restaurants in an attempt to curb excessive spending at a time of acute inflation. Many people defied this ban but the order did alter the mood in Frankfurt and Beckmann's painting was made partly in response to this specific event.*

- Do you think people view the work differently today from how it might have originally been seen?
- What do we know about the artist and how does this affect our interpretation of the work? (see Looking at the Subject section above.)
- Look at other works in the exhibition. How does this work compare to the earlier works? And later ones? To which is it more similar?

# 7. Self-Portraiture

'What are you and what am I? – These are questions that pursue and torment me, but which also perhaps help to make me an artist... The *Self* is indeed the greatest and obscurest secret in the world.' Max Beckmann, 1938

This exhibition includes many examples of Beckmann's considerable body of self-portraiture. These paintings give us a fascinating glimpse into his state of mind as the dramatic events of his life unfurled. He had made some self-portraits, both prints and paintings, before he started his work in the medical corps during the First World War. His experience of war, the loss of life and resulting emotional and physical damage to all concerned, fundamentally informed all his subject matter, including his self-portraiture. After he recovered from his war-induced breakdown, he painted himself as a successful and confident artist. During his exile in Amsterdam his self-portraits continued to allude to his state of mind, whether feeling unsure of the future or more self-sufficient and contained. Later in life, he went on to paint himself as a cynical observer of the world.

However in certain respects Beckmann's life is an example of the plight of many Germans and Europeans who suffered exile or worse through the perils of Hitler's regime. His feelings of being adrift in the world must have been shared by many, and in this sense it is possible to view Beckmann's self-portraits as a more universal expression of the individual searching for their own identity.

## **Self-Portrait with Red Scarf, 1917 (Room 2)**

Here Beckmann depicts himself as a witness to the atrocities of war. The red scarf suggests defiant protest, while his outstretched hand is poised to transcribe the events he is forced to witness onto the canvas. The church spire in the background and the cross formed by the mullioned windows also point to a sense of spiritual crisis.

## **Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927 (Room 8)**

The body language, posture and composition of this work are all strongly self-confident. Notice the tonal balance between black and white and the simplicity of the central pose – a confident painting of a powerful man. In fact, some critics found it rather too confident and objected to what they called its '*boche* arrogance', though the fact that his face is partly shadowed makes it rather more ambiguous. The contrast between black and white attest to the spiritual and material worlds, and it is possible that Beckmann sees himself as belonging to both worlds, particularly as his elbow merges with the black void on the left which could represent the darkness of the other world.

Beckmann was at the height of his success as a painter in Frankfurt when he made this painting. Yet less than ten years later *Self-Portrait with Tuxedo* was one of the paintings declared by the Nazis to be 'degenerate' and removed from its home in the Berlin

National Galerie. Beckmann's life and subsequent career were changed forever.

## **Self-Portrait with Horn, 1938 (Room 10)**

The use of musical instruments is common across European painting for centuries prior to Beckmann, symbolising the arts, creativity and in Germany particularly linked to folk songs. Here, the absence of an audience for creativity is particularly poignant, as this painting was made when Beckmann was already in exile in Holland. His striped outfit seems to combine a harlequin's costume with a convict's uniform – he equated exile with incarceration.

An earlier stage of this work showed Beckmann in a more relaxed and smiling pose but he changed the whole composition to create a more tentative and isolated portrait.

## **Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket, 1950 (Room 14) (pictured overleaf)**

Beckmann's last self-portrait was made when he had been living and working in America for three years. Here, he had been made to feel welcome and had been offered teaching work and major exhibitions.

The composition of the piece is similar to his *Self-Portrait in a Tuxedo*, painted at the height of his career in Germany. Like the earlier self-portrait, he stands confidently in the centre of the frame, only now he's a thinner and more world-weary man. It is as if now that he is secure in America he can finally take stock of the past and see that his career has come full circle.

This was painted in the year that Beckmann represented Germany with a one-man show in the Venice Biennale, which must have been a precious award to him after the preceding thirteen years in Holland, France and America. He died in New York on 27 December 1950, on his way to see this painting displayed in a New York exhibition.

## **Discussion points**

Compare the four portraits, considering the following questions:-

- How does the mood of the paintings vary? Does each painting portray for example a feeling of loneliness, confidence, arrogance or satisfaction? How does Beckmann use line, colour, tone and texture to convey the mood of the painting?
- Do you think Beckmann's self-portraits give you a good idea about what he was like as a person? What do you think his state of mind was when he painted each work?
- Do you think the paintings may reflect the kinds of events that were happening in the world at the time, and particularly events which affected Beckmann's life?
- What do you think Beckmann's views were on the role of the artist? For example did he think artists were important members of society? (Look for example at the emphasis he gives to his hands in many of the portraits, or the type of clothes he wears in some of the portraits.)

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## 8. Symbolism

'I am not particularly concerned with symbolism, I do not talk to myself about symbolism at all. I am only concerned with the architecture of the painting; the subject is absolutely personal.' Max Beckmann

Despite Beckmann's words, it is clear through his research of other artists and his knowledge of Greek mythology, German folk tales and many other sources, that he used symbols repeatedly in his work. However, it is unwise to seek too many neat explanations for his use of symbols as often they shift in meaning between paintings, refusing to be tied down into straightforward stories. He would have regarded a single explanation as implying an illustration-like quality to his work so he preferred viewers to supply their own ideas and suggestions, prompted by his images. The rise of Nazism undoubtedly strengthened this desire on Beckmann's part – the more complex and veiled in myth and symbols his paintings were, the less easily they could be interpreted as being political and hostile to the state.

### ***Departure, 1932 (Room 9) (pictured overleaf)***

Beckmann discussed this painting, his first triptych in the following way:

'Life is what you see right and left. Life is torture, pain of every kind – physical and mental – men and women are subjected to it equally. On the right wing you can see yourself trying to find your way in the darkness, lighting the hall and staircase with a miserable lamp, dragging along tied to you, as a part of yourself, the corpse of your memories, of your wrongs and failures, the murder everyone commits at some time of his life...

#### **And in the centre?**

The King and Queen, Man and Woman, are taken to another shore by a boatman whom they do not know, he wears a mask, it is the mysterious figure taking us to a mysterious land... The King and Queen have freed themselves of the tortures of life – they have overcome them. The Queen carries the greatest treasure – Freedom – as her child on her lap. Freedom is the one thing that matters – it is the departure, the new start.'

In his portrayal of utmost suffering combined with the possibility of bliss, Beckmann refers to one of his major influences, the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Matthias Grünewald and his work the *Isenheim* Altarpiece. Beckmann's debt to medieval religious painting is also clear in his choice of the triptych format, but here instead of the side panels depicting images of saints or angels, they are occupied by tortured and constrained human figures.

In *Departure* we can also see compositional links with Beckmann's painting *The Night* 1918–19 (see further notes on this painting in the section *Beckmann, History and Society*). In both paintings, we, as viewers, become an audience forced to adopt voyeuristic roles as if we too are intruding on the scene. In *Departure* it is unclear where and what the future will hold for

the protagonists. In the left and right panels, the figures appear more aware of us as the viewers than they do of each other.

### ***Still-Life with Three Skulls, 1945 (Room 12)***

This painting contains many elements of 'vanitas' and 'memento mori' paintings, fashionable throughout northern Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These paintings aimed to show us that life, with its pleasures of the company of friends, card games and drinking, also holds reminders of our own mortality and inevitable death. In this still-life by Beckmann, the skulls and extinguished candle are clearly intended to be read as symbols of the brevity of life.

What is different here from the older versions of 'vanitas' paintings is the energy and confidence of Beckmann's line and composition, which mixes a contradictory vivacity with a mordant wit.

### ***Carnival (Pierrette and Clown), 1925 (Room 7)***

The characters in this painting are Beckmann and his second wife Quappi. Beckmann himself often appears in his paintings, sometimes as himself, sometimes giving a character features similar to his own. Here the couple appear as two carnival characters – he is the blindfolded fool, head-over-heels in love, and she is perched on the chair, dressed in a blue carnival costume. Blue is the colour in which Beckmann most often portrayed her, and which he may possibly have associated with humanity's spiritual existence.

Throughout his life Beckmann developed his own personal iconography, in which circus imagery played a leading role. The circus of life was a metaphor that preoccupied Beckmann, particularly in the early twenties. Through his experience of exile from his own country he also identified with the nomadic life of a bohemian traveller.

### **Discussion points**

- After looking at several works by Beckmann make a list of favourite items or imagery he tends to use in his work. Discuss what they might mean and begin to make a Beckmann symbols dictionary.
- Does everyone in your group interpret items in the painting in the same way?
- Do you think it matters if we cannot read all the symbols in Max Beckmann's work?
- Compare *Departure* with a reproduction of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim* Altarpiece, which Beckmann acknowledged as a major influence. Approximately 800 years separate these two works, but what similarities do you notice (e.g. in composition, subject matter, mood)? What differences do you notice?
- Does *Departure* look like it is influenced by a religious source? Why, or why not?

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# 9. Beckmann, History and Society

'I would like to emphasise that I have never been politically active in any way. I have tried only to realize my conception of the world as intensely as possible.' Max Beckmann, 1938

In addition to the self-portraits created throughout his life, Beckmann's other paintings such as landscape, history or mythological works give us a picture of his engagement with the state of the world in which he lived. Whether he tried to make a clear point about his particular opinions or whether he masked his thoughts with a veil of symbolism, he believed that one of the artist's roles in society was to explore both collective and personal events, presenting the public with a vision of the world in which they lived.

## ***The Night, 1918-19 (Room 3) (pictured overleaf)***

- *Please note: Some students may be uncomfortable with this image. Please use your discretion.*

The torture and pain depicted in this painting are at odds with the extraordinary meticulous planning of the composition. The complex and careful ordering of the figures heighten the psychological charge that the painting carries. The physical description and the emotional suggestion of modern sadism is acute. The imagery is violent and so is Beckmann's use of lines and his distortion of the architecture of the room.

In the catalogue accompanying this exhibition, in an essay entitled 'The Beckmann Effect', Robert Storr writes of this painting:

'In the wan light of this nocturnal hell no distinction is made between animate and inanimate imagery. Human legs and table legs are splayed in the same way; the tautness of stretched fabric or the tensile strength of window frame are analogous to distended flesh and rigid, brittle bone.'

Again, as repeated later in the left and right panels of *Departure* 1945, we, the viewers, observe the violence and notice how no-one in the painting seem able to help others escape from this desperate scene. Only the dog howls on the extreme left, as if to appeal to the outside world. The only other possible sign of hope seems to rest in the candle which has somehow stayed alight in this almost clinically cold room. Made at the end of the First World War, as Beckmann and the rest of Germany struggled to come to terms with the huge scale of human loss and psychological damage, this painting remains shocking and brutal in its suggestion of rape and torture.

Beckmann continued to develop his painting style and themes throughout his career in relation to his own lived experience of these complex political and historical events. His handling of the themes of violence and implicit political comment contributed to his status in Germany throughout the 1920s, with his work being regularly exhibited and bought by

major collectors. Ironically, it was exactly this social relevance and his moral and ethical engagement with the political climate in Germany that led to his eventual dismissal from his teaching post in Frankfurt in 1933. Nearly 600 of his works were confiscated from museums and public collections by the Nazis.

## ***Landscape with Lake and Poplars, 1924 (Room 5)***

The location of this scene is a park in Frankfurt, the city Beckmann moved to after his experiences of the First World War. By 1924, a number of German artists, Beckmann among them, had turned away from the expressive outpouring of emotion that had characterised their earlier work. Instead they created a new stylistic movement called 'Neue Sachlichkeit' or New Objectivity, which was much more restrained and quiet. Beckmann's landscape painting during the 1920s reflects his relatively peaceful and prosperous existence at this time.

See also *Self-Portrait with Tuxedo, 1927*, discussed in the Self-Portraits thematic sheet.

## ***Falling Man, 1950 (Room 14)***

This painting was completed the same year Beckmann died and contains his most striking comments on the theme of death. There is a strong duality in the work: is the man diving into flames or flowers? Does the blue area represent sky or water? Do we read the painting from a planar or bird's eye view (i.e. is the man falling head first, or horizontally like a parachutist?) There is no one clear interpretation of this work but it is possible that it refers to either a person hurtling towards their death, or opposing this, hurtling into life and towards the problems of their own existence. (It was the latter reading that Beckmann preferred.)

## **Discussion points**

- From the evidence you can see in the exhibition, what do you think Beckmann's response was to the First World War?
- What was his response to the Second World War? (See for example *Apocalypse Portfolio, 1941-2*, and *Dream of Monte Carlo, 1940-3*.)
- How does the work he made during each of these two periods differ?
- There is no doubt that Beckmann lived through very turbulent times. Discuss whether or not you feel his work is something you might expect to be made by someone living in such a period.
- The painting *Night* is certainly shocking to look at. If someone wanted to highlight or record the horrors of war nowadays, what media do you think they might use to do so? (Students might be familiar with documentary photography, video footage etc). Do you find these types of image more or less shocking than *The Night*? Why, or why not?

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