

Book Review – *Max Beckmann in New York*

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Written by Sabine Sewald and published by Yale University Press, this catalogue accompanies the eponymous exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Fifth Avenue, 16 October 2016–20 February 2017; 148 pages with color reproductions of all the paintings from the exhibition plus other Beckmann works, numerous archival photographs, and illustrations, letters, and sketches from the artist's notebooks and journals.

Max Beckmann's enigmatic status as an artist between countries, cultures, and epochs in painting and as the German who defied categorization but nonetheless imported the motifs of the avant-gardes to the post-war United States, remains endlessly open to re-inspection and continues to present a challenge to many over-confident definitions of "Modern" art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Max Beckmann in New York* exhibition was an inspired idea, concentrating on Beckmann works connected in some fashion to the city while allowing for perspectives on the painter's full oeuvre.

At the Met, the Beckmann exhibit of 39 paintings occupied a low-ceilinged hall of facing alcoves just off the opulent Roman antiquities wing, which provided a startling aperitif to Beckmann's dramatic scenes of modernity which often directly reference both mythology and antiquity. Though the exhibition was staged with exemplary clarity and chronology, because of its popularity and the large sizes of many of Beckmann's canvases – factors which made it difficult to appreciate the work closely and contemplatively – Sabine Sewald's richly detailed catalogue offers crucial augmentation to both the paintings and the circumstances of their making.

A foreword by the Met's director Thomas P. Campbell creates a back story for the show, which is, given Beckmann's stature, surprisingly only the third devoted to his work amid the city's vast museum network:

“New York energized the German Expressionist Max Beckmann and stimulated his imagination when he lived there from September 1949 to December 1950. Among his favorite places was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In late December 1950 he set out from his apartment at 38 West 69th Street to see his *Self Portrait in Blue*, painted that year and on view in an exhibition at the Met. On the corner of 69th Street and Central Park West the artist suffered a fatal heart attack. The poignant circumstances of his death served as the inspiration for this volume and the exhibition it accompanies.” (vi)

Aside from the fact that Beckmann famously despised the Expressionists and would have been apoplectic to be named as one, Sewald's long introductory essay, pitched to just the

right level for both the seasoned audience and non-specialists alike, is substantially researched and far from sentimental. (Any nostalgic cravings for “how the art world used to be” are abundantly satisfied by the bonus inclusion of Gero von Boehm’s 1983 interview with Mathilde “Quappi” Beckmann, the artist’s widow, titled “‘He Spoiled Me Terribly’: Living on Broadway for Thirty Years, She Has Looked After Her Husband’s Pictures.”)

Sewald, the Met’s curator for Modern art, instead provides a focused examination of Beckmann’s time in New York in the context of the art of his contemporaries, the popular and “irascible” (39) non-objective painters including Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, in whom he had no interest, and the post-World War II art market, in which *Kunsthändler* such as Curt Valentin and J.B. Neumann, who had once been as famous and socially mobile as the European artists they represented, struggled for currency in every sense of the word. Ambivalent notes from Beckmann reflect on this experience of dislocation: “New York is actually not a city but a vast jungle that to explore and get to know would take an entire lifetime.” (9)

In fact Beckmann had been hermetic before coming to New York, philosophically and then geographically. Deemed too conservative to receive an invitation to the watermark Köln Sonderbund show of 1912, Beckmann’s work was declared *entartete Kunst* – degenerate art – by 1937, which precipitated his voluntary exile from Germany to the Netherlands, where he remained for a decade. Beckmann’s emigration from Amsterdam to teach at Washington University in St. Louis in 1948 and then to New York City for an instructor position at the Brooklyn Museum School of Art in 1949 is often treated in literature on the artist as a liberation. Sewald’s careful weaving of archival text and narrative, however, make clear that although Beckmann was exceedingly productive during his months in the city, producing scores of sketches and more than a dozen large-format paintings, his experience of community remained circumscribed.

Sewald juxtaposes accounts and reminiscences of Beckmann’s earlier life in Frankfurt and Paris with his later years in New York City and a figure of consistent private contrarianism emerges. The mid-century Beckmann, rather than befriending those in Manhattan’s art, music, and literature scene seemingly squandered his free hours walking in Central Park and visiting hotel bars and cabarets. He spent the majority of his time working in a somewhat modest studio and apartment – one cruelly ridiculed by the curator William Valentiner as reminiscent of the “cheap nightclubs” Beckmann often painted. (34)

Sewald clearly relishes the virtuosity of palette, intellectual ambition, and brutality of Beckmann’s canvases. Since it is in fact these aspects of his work that present a challenge to viewers in looking closely at his paintings, Sewald’s passages of formal analysis are immensely useful in helping appreciation of subtle details of line and form while taking in the inventiveness of Beckmann’s allegorical, and in some cases literal, content.

The structure of the second two-thirds of the catalogue, which ambitiously devotes a full entry to each of the paintings in the exhibition, allows some of Beckmann’s major themes to come across even more clearly in print than in person. Beckmann was often his own subject and self-portraits from the 1920s through to 1950 occupy a prominent number of

positions, including 1938's *Self-Portrait with a Horn* (one of the painter's oft-depicted attributes) and his last, *Self-Portrait in a Blue Jacket* (1950). Sewald offers interesting anecdotes about each, such as in the case of *Self-Portrait in Front of Red Curtain* (1923), which was owned by the Munich publisher Reinhard Piper, whose imprint had produced *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*. The painting was "the victim of an 'assassination attempt' during an exhibition in Vienna in 1924 when an unhinged visitor slashed it with a knife." (54) It was repaired and repainted by Piper himself.

The impact of early Renaissance and academic styles of continental portraiture are evident in Beckmann's numerous paintings of his wife. The elongation and spatial coherence of *Quappi with White Fur* (1937), with naturalistic details such as the furniture and oval painting in the background and the lush materiality of the clothing in this picture, make it seem superficial in the manner of Kees von Dongen. But as Sewald points out, this portrait is conjured purely from Beckmann's imagination, as 1937 marked the beginning of the Beckmanns' lives outside Germany.

Among the catalogue's other highlights are numerous photographs of the Beckmanns and their professional circle as well as images of mid-century Manhattan. Sketches from Beckmann's notebook give insight into the finished paintings they become without diminishing reception. – Jean Marie Carey (<http://www.germanmodernism.org>)