



EXHIBITION TEXTS „MAX BECKMANN – DEPARTURE“

INTRODUCTION

Travel, leave-taking, and departure shaped and punctuated Max Beckmann's life (1884–1950). Often exhilarating but also often painful, these experiences were fuelled by luxurious holidays, wanderlust, and the desire for freedom, but also war, dislocation, transit, and exile. For the first time, departure and travel as core existential experiences of artists in the first half of the 20th century are the focus of an exhibition on Max Beckmann. The presentation of works of art alongside personal items and documents from the Max Beckmann Estate highlights the enormous range of travel-related imagery in his oeuvre. Beckmann gave his first triptych the ambiguous English title *Departure*. The theme of travel in art and myth still preoccupied him when he painted *Argonauts*, his last completed triptych.

The eight exhibition chapters show Beckmann in restless motion—as a tourist visiting fashionable seaside and ski resorts, as a flaneur observing the theatre of life in metropolitan streets, as a guest of bars, hotels, and cinemas, as an exile in Amsterdam during WWII with his freedom of movement severely restricted, and, finally, as a celebrated artist in the United States, where he explored new and unfamiliar landscapes with an eye on geology and mythology. We travel in Beckmann's footsteps; we follow the private individual to actual places and events on his travels, but we also follow the painter, thinker, and reader into his studio, the site of imaginary, metaphysical, and cosmic journeys. “Departure from the illusions of life towards the essential realities that lie hidden beyond” was the crux of Beckmann's aesthetic programme. As a result, the actual destinations increasingly dissolved and recoalesced into a painterly vision of passage and departure.

All documents, photographs, books and objects exhibited here are part of the artist's estate at the Max Beckmann Archive of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

DEPARTURE

With his painting *Departure*, begun in 1932, Max Beckmann set out for new horizons. Adopting the traditionally religious format of the triptych, the artist turned to monumental figures rooted in mythological and Christian imagery. Spanning three canvases, the painting frames the central hopeful image of setting sail for freedom and the open seas with cramped scenes set in a dark world of terror and violence. The triptych was painted in Frankfurt and Berlin in 1932/33, a period that coincided with the Nazis' rise to power and the start of Beckmann's defamation as a “degenerate artist”. Ten years later, the work was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Beckmann gave it the English title *Departure*. It established the German artist's fame in America at a time when Beckmann himself was still stuck in exile in Amsterdam. It was not until 1947 that he was finally able to sail for the US, a departure he described as a once-in-a-lifetime event. For Beckmann, the idea of the ocean voyage remained closely linked to that of the journeys undertaken by the mythical heroes of antiquity, on which the artist drew to reflect his own experience of being uprooted and forced into exile.



TRANSIT

Max Beckmann lived a life of “constant transit”. Always eager to move on but never quite arriving, his life was a blur of holiday destinations, changed addresses, places recalled in memory or seen for the first time, as he went from despairing about this world to fantasising about the one to come. Modernity gave rise to new transit locations, means of transport, passages, and portals that routinely whisk people from one place to another without allowing them to belong. In his art, Beckmann visualised such places of transit as train stations, ports, and hotels, and presented views from moving vehicles—automobiles, trains, and ships. His works display an ambivalence toward all this coming and going and the pace of metropolitan life, with a tone that oscillates between romanticism and alienation. In Beckmann’s hands, the theme of transport was itself a vehicle allowing the artist to turn a supposedly apolitical motif such as a landscape into a subtle reference to contemporary events and his own mental state. The Nazis’ cultural policy forced Quappi and Max Beckmann into exile; they initially expected Amsterdam to be a place of transit, a temporary solution that eventually ate up more than ten years of their lives, as emigration to the USA became impossible due to war. Trapped in Holland, Beckmann painted pictures of far-off places from memory and from postcards and photographs. His diaries, correspondence, application forms, and passport papers tell the tale of this life in hopeful transit, as well as the collective experience of loss, displacement, and dislocation.

THE WINDOW

The window was an important visual motif for Max Beckmann through four decades of work. Windows form a threshold between the interior and exterior world, the home and the unknown, between close, familiar surroundings, and far-off things, good or bad, desired or remembered. Like hardly any other modern artist, Beckmann made the window picture, with its numerous compositional and symbolic facets, a leitmotif of his art. Beckmann used the window as a device to show various outside views seen from within, but sometimes also showed the opposite: framed interiors observed from outside, through hotel or shop windows or portholes on ships.

However, the window picture really comes into its own when Beckmann uses it to trace his journeys, real or imaginary. The exhibition presents a series of city views, studied while looking out of apartments in Frankfurt, Paris, and Berlin—places he momentarily called home. Distinct from these are scenes through windows stemming from leisure trips, or views of resorts in Scheveningen, Naples, Nice, or Marseille seen from his hotel. Another group of experimental window pictures suggests a restless mobility by reproducing window scenes in moving vehicles—automobiles, trains, or ocean liners.



THE SEA

Max Beckmann always saw the sea as a place of longing, artistic inspiration, and repose, offering him the chance to reflect on time and space and presenting a gateway to possible undiscovered worlds. His affinity with the sea is evident in scores of ocean images, while his fascination with the secrets of its vastness is reflected in many books in his personal library about the ancient super-ocean, fossils, or the location of the legendary island of Atlantis.

For Beckmann, the sea was a place of restoration, antithesis to the big city. While the North Sea and the Baltic were recurring motifs in his early paintings, he later increasingly turned to the Mediterranean, which he experienced as a fashionable tourist and flaneur. During his years of exile in Amsterdam, when travel was denied him, the painter made numerous landscapes of the Côte d'Azur and Riviera from photographs and picture postcards. These images were the stuff of longing, windows of the mind recalling a sun-drenched Mediterranean world. But these years also saw Beckmann repeatedly give visual expression to the threatening aspect of the sea, its elemental power and risk to life.

CITY HOTEL BAR

Max Beckmann was an inveterate and passionate urbanite. He lived in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Paris, went into exile in Amsterdam, and finally moved to the US where he lived in St. Louis and New York. Meanwhile, holiday trips took him to cities such as Nice, Naples, and San Francisco. For the artist and flaneur Beckmann, the city was the set of the *comédie humaine*, the stage of the “theatre of the world”, and an inexhaustible source of inspiration. With their hotels, bars, restaurants, vaudevilles, and cinemas, cities were the perfect environment to provide the artist with night-time entertainment and distraction.

In the turmoil of world wars, exile, and migration that marked the first half of the 20th century, elegant hotels in glamorous resorts and metropolitan cities emerged as spaces that facilitated sophisticated social encounters and interaction. In the microcosm of the hotel, all manner of people—elegant, desperate, pleasure-seeking, or stranded—found a temporary home away from home. The ensuing social clashes and, even more so, the theatrical character of the hotel, with its stage set of mirrors, doors, stairways, and exits, inspired Beckmann's drama *The Hotel*—one of three texts in which the painter tried his hand as a playwright. But it was in his paintings and works on paper that Beckmann endlessly shuffled and reshuffled this “great human orchestra”, juxtaposing and intertwining “sorrow and champagne”, as his art dealer Israel Ber Neumann put it.



FILM

Max Beckmann was an impassioned cinema-goer. Records show that he routinely went to the movies in Frankfurt, Berlin, Paris, in exile in Amsterdam, but also in St. Louis and New York. Watching moving pictures in the dark of the cinema at night was a way for the painter to take his mind off work after spending hours toiling on a canvas that left him physically and mentally drained. In effect he went from producing pictures in his studio to passively consuming productions of the motion-picture industry. Beckmann would watch almost any kind of movie, including romances, comedies with Hans Moser, slapsticks with Laurel and Hardy, serious dramas, period dramas, thrillers, and gangster movies. His painting *Film Studio* of 1933 combines film sets of a winter landscape with scenes from a shoot, and was made after visiting the UFA studios in Babelsberg upon invitation of German film star Heinrich George.

In the late 1920s the Beckmanns even started making home movies using a hand-held camera. The couple would then play their two minutes' worth of recorded footage on the same projector now preserved at the Max Beckmann Archive. Their film material offers us an intimate glimpse of the travels and pastimes of Quappi and Max Beckmann.

A selection of the films that Beckmann saw in the 1940s is shown by the Theatiner Filmtheater in the film series: "Departure – Max Beckmann and the Cinema"
www.theatiner-film.de

COSMOS STUDIO

The most far-flung and complex journeys that Max Beckmann ever went on were completed inside the four walls of his studio. With book in hand, he was an "armchair traveler", forever reading his way through time and space, and consulting philosophical, theological, and scientific writings to explore the origins of the world, humanity, and distant civilizations. In the 1920s, Beckmann started presenting the artist's studio as a mysterious place of secret creation and cast himself as an astronomer, magician, or alchemist, forging his own worlds in his laboratory. In addition to reading, Beckmann's imaginary journeys were stimulated by artifacts from non-European cultures. He dotted them in no particular order around his apartments and studios, not as a connoisseur with a specialist bent, but as someone with a special attachment to them. There they assumed a function of their own: imbued with magical power, they could transport the painter to other times and places, as "stirrup-holders" for his artistic imagination to latch onto, taking him to worlds that sometimes defied the laws of evolution and geography.

All of the books, artworks, personal belongings, and other objects on view here were found in the artist's home and studio and were donated to the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in 2015 as part of the Max Beckmann Estate. In the case of many objects, we have only been able to partially piece together their origin and how they came to be in Beckmann's possession and studio. At this point, we know that Max and Quappi Beckmann received the objects either as gifts or as family heirlooms passed down by Quappi's family, the Kaulbachs.



ARGONAUTS — ARRIVAL?

On 26 December 1950, the day before his death, Max Beckmann completed his ninth triptych, which deals with the fundamental questions of artistic creation and the pursuit of knowledge.

A few days earlier, prompted by a dream, Beckmann had changed the title of the painting from *The Artists* to *Argonauts*. In renaming the work, he clearly referenced the Greek mythological heroes who set out aboard the *Argo* in search of the legendary Golden Fleece. Departure, quest, and the prospect of arrival form the narrative arc that spans not only this triptych but also Beckmann's biography and his life's work. His early breakout painting *Young Men by the Sea* of 1905 now enters into a dialogue with the two nude figures in the central panel of his final work. The triptych points the way to the ultimate goal of Beckmann's artistic quest, the promise of reaching a higher level of consciousness that transcends mere earthly toil.

ELLEN HARVEY [*1967 Farnborough, Great Britain]

Max Takes a Walk, 2022

Video animation, 3 minutes

In this video, a hand-drawn figure walks through the more than 200 postcards found in Max Beckmann's estate. The picture postcards are arranged roughly chronologically, starting with Beckmann's early visits to Paris, then from his sojourn in Flanders during World War I, happy souvenirs of holidays in Italy and the South of France, followed by his exile in Amsterdam in World War II and his last years in the USA. Just as Beckmann used some of his postcards to inspire his compositions, here the Beckmann-figure is inspired from time to time to don a variety of costumes or to attempt to inhabit different persona. In the end, however, the figure cannot escape either the inexorable march of time or the prison of his own personality.

The British-born conceptual artist Ellen Harvey lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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