INTRODUCTION

I had heard of Max Beckmann's reputation as one of the most formidable post-war artists of the 20th century. In August 2003 I travelled to New York to see an extremely rare exhibition of a large number of his works, the most notable of which were seven of the nine triptychs that he completed during his lifetime. Although I was already interested in Beckmann I was not prepared for the profound effect his paintings had on me. I had never realised that is was possible to accurately and successfully portray on canvas the extreme torment and pain that an individual may experience, yet it seemed to me that, in some of his works, Beckmann expressed this to perfection.

At the outbreak of World War I Beckman enlisted and was trained as a medical orderly. Shortly thereafter he was sent to the East Prussian front where his experience of death and destruction caused him to have a mental breakdown. After being demobilised he was, for a period, associated with a short-lived movement called New Objectivity, which concentrated on the literal portrayal of the brutal discord that followed World War I.

Recovery and a desire to put the past behind him caused Beckmann to break away from New Objectivity and gave him the opportunity pursue his art in a more generic direction which gave rise to great material success and access to life in 'high society'. This all changed again when Hitler came to power and confiscated many thousands of paintings by Germany's modern artists. Beckman in particular was targeted by the Nazis and forced to go into exile in Holland. This brought back not only all the trauma associated with his experiences on the front line in the First World War but also induced a depth of anger and frustration that was to give rise to an artistic style so distinctive and disturbing that once seen is hard to forget.

Another reason for choosing Beckmann for an in depth study is that I consider myself politically active, and I want to explore the idea of the of the arm-chair activist. As we all are fed the information given to us by the television and the internet, we have little else to base our judgements on, and while we protest about these various wars, we protest out of

a moral gut-reaction, as we (for the most part) have no direct experience of it. It is Beckmann's experiences that are shown through his art and that alone is more valuable than another 90 minute exposé, a carefully marketed documentary to persuade you to feel guilty that you are not there, encouraging you to give money, but most importantly they don't show you how to feel what those who are suffering feel.

Beckmann's experiences of both World War I and World War II changed the way he perceived the world and as a result the way he painted. The subject of history as is taught in schools rarely seems to touch on art, yet if one was curious about direct emotional consequences such as those of the world wars on the individual one would need look no further than Beckmann whose major works are a distillation of these catastrophic events. It is the impact of both the World Wars on Beckmann and his work that is the subject of this essay.

My research question is **did Max Beckmann's experiences of war contribute to his success as a painter?**

It is my opinion that Max Beckmann's work would have been entirely different if he had not experienced these two wars.

BODY/DEVELOPMENT

In the development of my answer to my research question I will use a number of sub-headings to illustrate the changes in Beckmann's successes as an artist both before and after his experiences in each of the world wars. The sub-headings are as follows:

- Beckmann's Youth and Works Pre-World War I
- World War I and its effect on Beckmann's art
- *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity)
- World War II and Beckmann's Persecution
- *The Departure* (a detailed study of one of Beckmann's triptychs)

BECKMANN'S YOUTH

The youngest of three children Beckmann was born in 1884 in the town of Liepzig, Germany. His father was a wealthy grain merchant who died when Beckmann was only ten years old. In order to secure the best possible future for him, Beckmann's family decided to send him away to be educated at a boarding school. It was their hope that he would follow in his father's footsteps and enter the world of commerce. At aged fifteen, however, Beckmann announced that his future was as a painter, and nothing else, and the following year in 1900 he left school and enrolled in an art school called the Grossherzogliche Sächsische Kunstschule in Weimar. This provided him with an artistic education that emphasised in particular the techniques of drawing. Interestingly this would not be the only time Beckmann practised art in Weimar, as the Bauhaus, a centre for artists involved in New Objectivity was created there by Adolf Gropius.

Beckmann completed his studies at the school in Weimar in 1903, and after further three years study and practise he had become a successful painter. Shortly afterwards he moved to Berlin where he joined the Berlin Secession, a group of progressive modern artists who had rejected and broken away from established artistic societies of the time. There Beckmann began to show his paintings at exhibitions organised by the Secession together with such artists as Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth. By 1910 he was so highly

respected by his colleagues that he was elected to the executive board of the Secession, a post he would later relinquish to concentrate on his painting.

From 1910 up until the First World War in 1914 Beckmann was highly influenced by painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Peter Paul Rubens, and at that time he involved himself in grand, mythical and religious compositions in the classical style With the arrival of the First World War however Beckmann's life and work were severely interrupted and subsequently distorted to an entirely altered plane.

WORKS PRE-WORLD WAR I

From early in his career as a painter Beckmann became devoted to making art that was relevant to the times. In 1908 he produced *Balloon Race* (see appendix), a painting depicting a hot air balloon race in the winter of that year. In this picture Beckmann refrains from giving the picture such life that is concurrent with the images that the idea of a race provokes, and instead imbues it with a dreamy character, without energy almost. As Beckmann was trying to capture images that were current to the times, it is important to note that the age of photography and cinematography had begun and that since he was painting in a journalistic fashion it was therefore seem even more imperative that his paintings of an event like the hot air balloon race truthfully portray the feeling and excitement and speed of the race. It is this very lack of 'impact' and literal depiction that is prevalent through his many of his early paintings and which encouraged the scorn of many critics.

In 1912 on April 15th the catastrophic event of the sinking of the Titanic stimulated Beckmann to paint *The Sinking of the Titanic* (see appendix). It is the view of many critics that Beckmann drew his inspiration not only from the event itself but also from Theodore Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (see appendix). His painting is everything that Gericault's is not. There is no feeling of intensity, terror, hope, conflict or despair, instead it is somewhat gentle and following in the style of the earlier *Balloon Race* has a rather dream-like quality about it. The people who have escaped are not struggling, but calm, as is the ship itself in the background. The Titanic is not sinking, it remains as it was when all its passengers were escaping. This may be an attempt to show a tranquillity and grandeur of spirit in the face of urgency and chaos and might have succeeded if there had actually been a sense of pandemonium all around. This lack of exigency leads me to feel that the title of the painting rather than painting itself brought more weight to the perception of it. Curt Glaser, a writer and collector said it best, 'Beckmann merely showed an episode, leaving the sense of catastrophe curiously absent'. It has been said that *The Sinking of the Titanic* exhibits man's dependency on technology, and the idea of

a perfect technological world. I do not agree with this perception since that as long as the ship remains afloat there is no sense of disorder.

WORLD WAR I AND ITS EFFECT ON BECKMANN

With the outbreak of World War One Beckmann, like many of his contemporaries enlisted with enthusiasm. The prospect of war was viewed as a gateway to the destruction of the old order and the creation of the new. This was a chance for young men to not only prove themselves as men and as patriots but also to be part of the forging of a better world. Beckmann trained as a medical orderly and was stationed on the East Prussian Front. This is a passage written by him about his early experiences there:

"I went across the fields to avoid the straight highways, along the firing lines where people were shooting at a small wooded hill, which is now covered with wooden crosses and lines of graves instead of spring flowers. On my left the shooting had the sharp explosion of the infantry artillery, on my right could be heard the sporadic cannon shots thundering from the front, and up above the sky was clear and the sun bright, sharp above the whole space. It was so wonderful outside that even the wild senselessness of this enormous death, whose music I hear again and again, could not disturb me from my great enjoyment!" (www.sohoart.com)

If one tries to imagine being in Beckmann's situation it is easy to empathise with him, the supposed glamour that the war promised must have seemed like an enticing prospect, it promised the creation of a new order whilst also providing new artistic challenges. At first he was mesmerised by his new situation, even excited by being there. He felt that the conflict and destruction was feeding his artistic being and seemed to act as an inspiration for him.

The enjoyment however soon turned to madness as the war progressed. Unable to escape the 'phantasmagoria of violence' (Moma Catalogue) Beckmann became deeply disturbed by what he saw and heard. As an orderly he risked death through bringing back the

wounded and dying from the front lines. The smell of acrid smoke all around, the cries of pain of his fellow men and the relentless sounds of bombardment meant that the no-mans-land of war on the front was a nightmare from which he could not wake. The horrific void as he saw it instilled in him a sense of complete despair of both place and humanity. There was nothing there but death and emptiness. Beckmann's writings change dramatically during the progression of the war, gone are all idealistic hopes and romanticism fed by naivety and youth and what replaces them is a terrible bitterness, misery and discontent.

'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.' (Beckmann Exhibition MoMa QNS)

The Hell portfolio (see appendix for one example) is a perfect example of Beckmann's sentiments at the time. His series of lithographs show a world of pain and suffering that have an overwhelming impact. They depict various scenes from the war, visceral brutalities and political issues. The pictures are hectic, crammed with movement, people, places, anything to fill the void that Beckmann was still feeling from the sights and sounds of no-mans-land. These images compel the viewer to look in to that void and I believe that is what he wanted. He wanted to bring you into Max Beckmann's hell, to see all the things he saw or dreamt, the state of Germany, the horror of the human condition, all conveyed in a manner so striking that I for one, will remember them for the rest of my life.

I thought it would be appropriate to draw on my own limited experiences in this essay as it is a study on how war effects an individual, and in doing so I have realised an interesting fact, that were it not for television, our knowledge and definitely our feelings may have been entirely different. The only war that we who have the privilege of living

in non-conflicted countries see is that through our television. All the pain and suffering of a thousand life-times is condensed into a small 10''x 12'' box, it is hard to imagine what war is truly like for those on that small screen, yet Beckmann had this all around, in living colour.

Beckmann lasted at the front line for a year until late 1915 when the situation he was faced with became so extreme that it led him to have a nervous breakdown. At that point he was demobilised after and sent away to recover. During his recuperation he visited Flanders where there were a number of museums and churches, it was here where one of the most seminal moments of his life would take place. Here Beckmann saw the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (see appendix), originally made for the hospital chapel in St. Anthony's Monastery in Isenheim in Alsace. It is a complicated structure with three entirely different views that are shown in the following pages. This piece was created by Matthais Grünewald in the 16th century and is considered to express the suffering of Christ better than most of his contemporaries.

Beckmann drew great inspiration from this work, and seemed to decide that this tortured realism was something he wished to portray. It is easy then to understand the nature of New Objectivity and Beckmann's relationship with it.

NEW OBJECTIVITY

New Objectivity

(Ger. Neue Sachlichkeit), German art movement of the 1920s. The chief painters of the movement were George Grosz and Otto Dix, who were sometimes called verists. They created styles of bitter realism and protest that mirrored the disillusionment following World War I. New objectivity retained the intense emotionality of earlier movements in German art (see Brücke and Blaue Reiter), but it abandoned the symbolism of expressionism for direct social commentary. Max Beckmann produced works in a related, though more philosophical, vein. (see appendix for examples of Grosz and Dix)

The Columbia Encyclopaedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

New Objectivity was a movement founded by Adolph Gropius another World War One veteran. The movement was born out of an institution called the Bauhaus also founded by Gropius. The Bauhaus was essentially an art school that aimed to combine many different techniques together to provide a wider understanding of art.

New Objectivity provided a realistic social commentary of the time. It portrayed the discord of the times, showing everything in a painfully pragmatic manner, from the bourgeoisie Weimar culture and its excesses to the effect of war on everyday life. We can see why Beckmann was associated with it and how *The Isenheim Altarpiece* inspired him to express the suffering of his times.

WORLD WAR II AND BECKMANN'S PERSECUTION

The association with the New Objectivity movement did not last. Beckmann started to show signs of physical and mental recovery from the trauma of the front line. He gradually began painting more generic images, still powerful in their own right, but the conflict within them much more subtle. He focused on such subjects as his Italian holiday, producing paintings like *Italian Fantasy* (see appendix) which illustrates this period of calm in his life. Beckmann's paintings became popular and as a successful painter he was inducted into 'high-society'. He was moving in fashionable circles, had influential friends and most importantly he felt that this was where he belonged. Ironically he was living the very bourgeois lifestyle he had painted and criticised as a member of New Objectivity when focusing on the Weimar culture.

In my opinion, this entire period can be summed up in one painting; *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo* (see appendix). Everything about this painting screams elegance, style and above all confidence, it is as though he is saying that he has survived and arrived. The use of black in this picture is perfect, Beckmann uses it not to define light and dark, but as a true colour, which creates great intensity and a feeling of pure power. The hand on hip and the other delicately clasping a cigarette gives me the feeling that I am witnessing an exceptional moment where this seemingly indestructible, authoritative man relaxes for a moment and becomes a human like you or I.

'Made in 1927, when Beckmann was about 43, the painting presents an artist who is self-assured to the point of arrogance. He's a powerful, balding, slightly menacing figure dressed in black, a dandy rather than a bohemian, a man who might be a munitions mogul rather than a painter. There's nothing timid about that portrait. The image, one of more than 80 that Beckmann made of himself during a career that lasted a half-century, communicates force, conviction and sophistication. As artist self-portraits go, it's a classic.'(Edward J. Sozanski, Philadelphia Inquirer)

Unfortunately for Beckmann this period did not last and good fortune would soon change to bad. In 1933 when Adolf Hitler was made chancellor, German political life in general and cultural life in particular deteriorated. The Nazis viewed Modern art as socially and morally corrupt. They perceived it to be 'weakening the fibre of the country's heritage', an attitude that is concurrent with a regime whose aim is control of the people.

By 1937 Hitler had confiscated thousands of works which he used to put on an exhibition called Degenerate Art. This was a propaganda exercise designed to ridicule and ultimately crush the artistic community. The stolen works represented the cream of German modern artists; Kandinsky, Ernst and Schubert to name but a few. But there was particular focus on Beckmann and nearly six hundred of his works were removed from museums and art galleries all over Germany. It would seem that his violent portrayal of war and human excess perfectly presented the unacceptable face of artistic degeneracy. Beckmann was extremely distraught as a result of this and decided that to avoid further persecution by the Nazis he would have to move with his family to Amsterdam. They moved the day Hitler gave his radio broadcast at the opening of the Degenerate Art exhibition. The period of Beckmann's mental respite was over.

'The bitterness of his exile is evident in these [later] works: violence abounds, literally and emotionally. There are tortured, trussed-up figures and swords, and a characteristically stark, garish atmosphere, in which stage lit--and stage-struck—figures…are outlined in black, which sometimes spills onto their bodies, as though an intimation of death. Beckmann is clearly dealing with the dark side of human nature, and he sees no bright side. Indeed, the light seems artificial and forced in the works--like the party mood of many of them.' (Donald Kuspit, www.artnet.com)

I decided to include Kuspit's quote as I could not say it better, the violence and bitterness is so apparent in Beckmann's works after his self-imposed exile, and when you take into account his recent trajectory, from being a national hero (if one can use that term) to a degenerate, the emotional upheaval must have been extreme and difficult to come to terms with.

Beckmann worked through 1937-1947 in the confines of an old tobacco storeroom in central Amsterdam. Although he still frequented museums, galleries and churches he also went to many plays and other performances during this time. This led to his use of actors and performers in symbolic fashion as a means by which to portray Nazi brutality. A perfect example of this is his painting *The Actors* (see appendix), a triptych which shows the pretence of a play on the surface whilst the dark reality lurks beneath. Aside from occasional trips to Paris and the Dutch countryside Beckmann remained in Amsterdam. Interestingly enough this was one of the most prolific periods of his life, he produced nearly two hundred and fifty works in this time including five of the nine triptychs. It was as though he needed to be physically confined or restricted for his imagination to become free. The Second World War affected him in an entirely different manner, he was no longer portraying the suffering and discord looking from the inside-out but now he was an outsider looking in. This difference in perception and the addition of persecution and exile to his 'creative mix' added further differences to his approach to painting, most notably the subtle reclusion into symbolism and mythology.

In 1947 Beckmann's life changed again in quite a radical fashion. He was offered a teaching position in St. Louis, Missouri, USA which he accepted with alacrity and excelled at. After two years in 1949 he moved to New York where he became a painter in residence at the Brooklyn Museum School. On December 27th 1950 Beckmann died of a heart attack while leaving his house to visit a new exhibition of his work. By coincidence the day before his death he had finished one of his most celebrated paintings *The Argonauts* (see appendix), the ninth triptych.

THE DEPARTURE

I have chosen to include a small section and quotation on one of his works as firstly it is my favourite and secondly it is one of the most important paintings of his career partly to do with its form as it is a triptych (three paintings displayed together). Created during 1932-34 *The Departure* (see appendix) was finished at the beginning of Beckmann's persecution, what makes it more interesting is the apparent foresight of what the future held and what he would have to do. The message he is trying to convey is enforced by the three paintings complementing each other, the juxtaposition of cruelty and beauty. On the left we see what appears to be a premonition of Nazi-cruelty, there is a man whose hands have been cut off, a woman bound and kneeling on the floor, ready to be clubbed by a man standing above her wielding a bag of fish. This is one of his more ambiguous paintings which I feel is best left for Beckmann to explain:

'Life is what you see right and left; life is torture, pain of every kind both mental and physical. Men and women are subjected to it equally. On the right you can see yourself trying to find your way home in the darkness, lighting the hall and staircase with a miserable lamp dragging along, tied to you, is part of yourself, the corpse of your memories, your wrongs and failures. In the centre the King and Queen, man and woman, are taken to another shore by a man they do not know. The mysterious figure taking us to a mysterious land. The King and Queen have freed themselves from the tortures of life, they have overcome them. The Queen carries the greatest treasure, freedom, as her child in her lap. Freedom is the only thing that matters. Here is the departure, the new start.'
(Moma Audio guide).

Beckmann foresaw the inherent Nazi cruelty that was approaching, and more interestingly he knew that he would have to leave Germany (the centre panel) with his family.

CONCLUSION

If one was to think about the many famous painters and musicians over the ages, there are a great number whose genius bordered on insanity, for instance Van Gogh, Beethoven and Handel to name but a few. Their art was born from the wellspring of an interior psychological imbalance whereas Max Beckmann's apparent mental instability was imposed by exterior circumstances and experiences. The best of his paintings reflect these experiences in such a distorted manner that the sight of them alone would lead one to believe that this man is mentally unsound. The fact of the matter is that these are his depictions of events that have left a scar on his psyche and therefore he would have seen or felt them in the way that he painted them. When you look at a Max Beckmann painting you are looking at a snapshot of how he perceived and more importantly how he felt about what he had seen.

The wars and the persecution that he lived through had a massive effect on his attitude to humanity and life in general. His art did not suffer as a consequence but rather developed into such a distinctive and powerful style that it nearly impossible to attribute his post-war works to any other painter. It was as though he needed periods of trauma in order to feed such a stylised approach, it is apparent that a few years after World War One Beckmann seemed to relax and shrug off the pain and discord he had witnessed as a result his image lost their impact to a degree as he slipped back to a more generic manner of painting. This raises the question of whether if Beckmann had not gone through the troubles of war and discrimination would he have been a less celebrated painter, producing such generic and classical images that he began with. In my view, yes. I believe that the experience was integral to his success and without it he would have followed both trend and tradition, merely a greater painters contemporary.

To draw back to my point about experiencing war ourselves I wish to say that while we sit in our armchairs watch the images shown to us about the conflicts that plague our world, it is essential that we look to artists like Beckmann so as to understand the true

emotional impact of war, as without that our efforts to stop these atrocities will be born out of shallow morality and public opinion, not by true empathy.

To conclude this essay I thought it appropriate to include a quote about what a contemporary of Beckmann said about him:

‘This is what George Grosz, a fellow New York émigré, wrote after his death: "Beckmannmaxe was a kind of hermit, the Hermann Hesse of painting, German and heavy, unapproachable, with the personality of a paperweight, utterly lacking in humour."’

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