

A Balancing Act:
Max Beckmann and Post-War American Cultural Politics

Marie Elisabeth Ohlinger

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By: Marie Elisabeth Ohlinger

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_____ Chair

_____ Examiner
Dr. Elaine Cheasley Paterson

_____ Examiner
Dr. Nicola Pezolet

_____ Supervisor
Dr. Catherine MacKenzie

Approved by:

_____ Dr. Kristina Huneault, Graduate Program Director

_____ Dr. Rebecca Duclos, Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts

Date _____

Abstract

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Max Beckmann, one of the most significant German artists of the 20th century, immigrated to the United States in 1947 and entered into the last — but nevertheless productive — stage of his life. After ten years of isolation in Amsterdam exile, due to his denouncement as a “cultural Bolshevik” by the German National Socialist Party, the painter was finally able to work, exhibit and sell his art once again. He taught at Washington University in St. Louis and at the Brooklyn Museum School in New York City.

Despite declining health and financial insecurities, Beckmann travelled through large parts of the United States and accepted opportunities to speak about art on several occasions. In these speeches, Max Beckmann never returned to the explicit and programmatic messages so characteristic of his statements from the Weimar era. However, his reversion to active engagement as a teacher and speaker in his new cultural environment stood in stark contrast to his abstinence from stylistically or politically positioning himself during the reign of the National Socialists.

Even though Beckmann avoided taking an unequivocal stance concerning the cultural politics of the past which had affected his art, that avoidance or refusal cannot be ascribed to a lack of interest in or awareness of the political and cultural developments in post-war America. Indeed, upon closer examination, Beckmann’s activities and connections in the United States place him decisively within a large and influential network of intellectuals, curators and artists, many of them entangled as protagonists in the developing discourses ensuing of the cultural Cold War. As such and as has not been foregrounded in the scholarship on the artist, his restraint is indeed indicative of Beckmann’s acute insight into the emerging bipolar power structures of the Cold War conflict, with its attacks on certain “isms” in art, and his strategy to maneuver the increasing hegemony of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, both of which had serious repercussions for politicized art and artists.

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“Art, with religion and the sciences, has always supported and liberated man on his path. Art resolves through form the many paradoxes in life, and sometimes permits us to glimpse behind the dark curtain that hides those unknown spaces where one day we shall be unified.”

— Max Beckmann, Commencement Speech, Washington University, St. Louis, 1950

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Preface

In 2014, two Andy Warhol paintings — *Triple Elvis* and *Four Marlons*— sold at Christie’s for over \$150,000,000, sales which rekindled debates about the state’s appropriate role in support and protection of the arts in Germany.¹ Previously owned by WestSpiel, a state-owned and therefore tax-funded casino, the artworks were sold to reimburse some of the casino’s fiscal deficits. The idea that small municipalities would be able to sell artworks to settle financial debt triggered a storm of indignation, with opponents worrying that the case could set a dangerous precedent for the country at large and affect the safety of public and museum property.²

With the casino’s tactics now under public scrutiny, a similar although earlier case was soon uncovered. In 2006, a Max Beckmann self-portrait had been hurriedly and ‘secretly’ sold below market value for \$13,900,000, only to be offered for auction again a few months later in Maastricht, reportedly selling for a great deal more.³ The Beckmann painting had belonged to WestLB savings bank, also a state-owned institution.⁴ In both cases, the matter of concern was not the initial purchase of the works by state-sponsored institutions with a profit generated through tax payers, but what was lamented was that these works, undeniably iconic and valuable, had now disappeared from Germany’s cultural landscape and were lost to German audiences.⁵ ‘*Kulturstaatsministerin*,’ Monika Grütters, Germany’s cultural policy maker, argued that a stricter law dealing with cultural assets, their sale and exportation would have prevented these works from moving to foreign markets and from being sold to foreign collectors.

The Bundestag, Germany’s federal ‘parliament,’ reacted and drafted a legislative proposal for the protection of cultural goods in 2015. A preliminary version that leaked to the

¹ Verena Töpfer, “Umstrittener Verkauf: Warhol-Bilder bringen 150 Millionen Dollar.” *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, November 13, 2014. <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/westspiel-versteigert-andy-warhol-bilder-fuer-rekordsumme-a-1002625.html>

² “NRW will Verkauf von Warhol Bildern nicht stoppen.” *ZEIT ONLINE*, October 23, 2014. <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2014-10/westspiel-andy-warhol-nordrhein-westfalen-kasino>

³ The painting reportedly sold for \$30,000,000. Annette Bosetti and Thomas Reisener. “WestLB verkaufte Heimlich Kunst.” *Rp-online*, October 24, 2014. <http://www.rp-online.de/nrw/landespolitik/westlb-verkaufte-heimlich-kunst-aid-1.4617277>

⁴ “WestLB verkaufte bereits einen Beckmann.” *WELT*, October 24, 2014. https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/infoline_nt/boulevard_nt/article133626263/WestLB-verkaufte-bereits-eine-Beckmann.html

⁵ Rose-Maria Gropp, “Wo sollen all die Millionen hin?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, November 11, 2014. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/nrw-versteigert-warhol-bilder-bei-christie-s-in-new-york-13260718.html>

public alarmed more than just the German art scene, offering as it did stricter guidelines on how to guard art from “external migration” to foreign art markets.⁶ Works deemed as “nationally valuable” and “meaningful for the cultural heritage” would be restricted from sale outside the country.⁷ The initial draft declared that all long-term loans to museums extending beyond five years would automatically fall into this category, and in that case access to these works and collections would be granted to the state.⁸

Ensuing discussions revolved around the state’s authority to determine what is — and what is not — nationally valuable, what kinds of artwork demand protection, and what measures would be taken by the state to execute this authority. There was much public outcry and opposition came from such prominent figures as the artist Georg Baselitz and Mayen Beckmann, granddaughter of the painter Max Beckmann, who threatened to remove their long-term loans from museums, eventually causing the proposal to be reworked and resubmitted in 2016. In the German newspaper *ZEIT*, Thomas E. Schmidt argues that — even in its revised state — the law represents a framework that regulates the relationship between society, art and art ownership, a relationship that should fall into the civic sphere and be marked by voluntary principles. Sadly, what the law meant to prevent, it now encouraged: many dealers and collectors have already moved part of their collections into storage abroad, afraid of the state’s potential interference. Patrons are now likely to be more hesitant to lend their works to museums, in fear their art could be declared “nationally valuable” and effectively “expropriated.”⁹

The discussions about Grütter’s “cultural asset protection law” brought Max Beckmann’s art back into the headlines and reminded the reader about the precarious relationships between Germany’s history of art and politics. Even though long-term loans to museums are ultimately

⁶ Katja Strippel, “Neuer Entwurf für Kulturgutschutzgesetz Ende des Aufschreis?” *Tagesschau.de*, September 15, 2015. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/kulturschutzgesetz-103.html>

⁷ Die Bundesregierung, Staatsministerin für Kultur und Medien Monika Grütters, “Kulturgutschutz,” https://www.bundesregierung.de/Webs/Breg/DE/Bundesregierung/BeauftragtefuerKulturundMedien/kultur/kulturgutschutz-neu2/kurzgefasst/_node.html

⁸ Christian Herchenröder, “Eine Nation wird durchschnüffelt.” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 17, 2015. http://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst_architektur/eine-nation-wird-durchschnueffelt-1.18581521

⁹ Schmidt rightly reminds his readers that a German culture only exists in its exchange with other cultures and that national identity is a fluid construct, a product of a country’s relations within a global world. Therefore, the law represents a manipulation and restriction of the free-flowing international market forces, problematically demands declaration of private property and entails tax repercussions for individuals owning and selling art. Many see in the law the government overstepping boundaries in its authority over art and culture.

Thomas E. Schmidt, “Die Kunst wird als Regierungsmarketing missbraucht.” *ZEIT ONLINE*, June 24, 2016. <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2016-06/kulturgutschutzgesetz-bundestag-kommentar>

not affected by the revised legislation, for Mayen Beckmann the draft hit a very sensitive nerve.¹⁰ It was not the first time her grandfather's paintings had come under the scrutiny of the German government. Indeed, cultural politics have been a recurring theme in the creation, collection and reception of Max Beckmann's artworks. My thesis, concerning itself with Beckmann in the United States, where he worked for the last three years of his life, will address one of those moments.

¹⁰ Mayen Beckmann: "Because these art works represent the significant property of the family, I see myself forced to terminate the permanent loan contracts and again send the pictures abroad — where Max Beckmann's pictures had found refuge once before from the attacks of the German state or where they have been created after the painter had escaped German despotism — to prevent the 'imprisonment' of the family's property." Original German quote in: Schmidt, Thomas E. "Rebellion der Künste," *ZEIT ONLINE*, August 24, 2015. <http://www.zeit.de/2015/29/kulturschutzgesetz-monika-gruetters-widerstand/komplettansicht>

Introduction

Cultural politics have always played an influential role in the life of the painter Max Beckmann, affecting his work and his art, as well as the reception of his activities. Beckmann's artistic maturing and his political statements in the era of the Weimar Republic, his subsequent persecution by the National Socialist regime during the thirties, and the inclusion of the artist's work in the state-run and nationally circulating 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition of 1937 in Munich have already been extensively researched. Denounced as a 'cultural Bolshevik', he fled Germany and found exile in Amsterdam, where he was able to continue to paint (a period in the artist's life that also has been thoroughly addressed in scholarly literature). While I was initially drawn to undertaking provenance-research involving Beckmann's artworks that had come to the U.S. following their characterization as 'degenerate,' I realized during a graduate seminar in 2015 on Cold War: Art, Architecture and Global Politics taught by Dr. Nicola Pezolet, that Max Beckmann's activities from 1947 to 1950, when he lived in the United States, have not been adequately placed within their socio-political and cultural setting. In this thesis, I will argue that Max Beckmann's connections, travels, speeches, and exhibitions were much more influenced by the ramifications of U.S. cultural politics in the onset years of the Cold War conflict than has thus far been suggested by previous art historical narratives.

For the present analysis, focusing on the immediate post-war years, cultural politics are not only understood to be what Klaus von Beyme defined as 'art policy'— the doings of government authorities in the field of the arts¹¹ — but also as the result of a reciprocal relationship between the two entities, culture and politics. Christian Appy had discussed this relationship, claiming that culture is intrinsically political, as it encapsulates and reveals relations of power. Politics in turn, are cultural constructs which are embedded in systems of value and meaning.¹² Appy's ideas are reflected in the reception of Max Beckmann's art. Indeed, throughout the artist's career, Beckmann was faced with situations in which opposing systems of value were considered to be mutually exclusive and therefore entailed the subsequent political promotion of an 'official' dominant way of expressing cultural concepts. In the early Cold War

¹¹ Klaus von Beyme, *On Political Culture, Cultural Policy, Art and Politics* (Cham: Springer, 2014), 101.

¹² Christian G. Appy, *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of the United States Imperialism, 1945 – 1966* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 4.

years, the reciprocal relationship between culture and politics was acutely relevant, as art was employed in the political power struggles between the dual superpowers that emerged from World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, yet political activities on the side of North American artists were increasingly met with suspicion.

My thesis will employ a micro-historical approach to examine carefully the socio-political conditions and cultural interdependencies that affected Max Beckmann, pursuing a thorough assessment of the artist's activities as a newcomer to an unfamiliar environment he entered when immigrating to the United States. According to Giovanni Levi, microhistory's principle is that a focused view on a particular person, or a particular culture will reveal previously unnoticed aspects and dynamics of the given research domain. Microhistory gains in effectiveness "through a reduction of scale of observation [...] and an intensive study of the documentary material."¹³ The intended outcome of such analysis, through a focus on an individual's social structures, roles and relationships, is to expose the impact that these processes have on behavior and the "creation of [...] identities."¹⁴ The focus on these factors is pertinent for a study of the last three years of Max Beckmann's life that unfolded when he arrived in New York on September 8, 1947 and ended with his death on December 27, 1950 in the same city. Beckmann's arrival in North America marked a major geographical and social rupture, but did not present an abrupt end to monetary worries and existential fears about the future. Without firm employment and adequate language skills, Beckmann's integration into his new environment was cumbersome. His behavioral patterns and choice of relationships provide insight into Beckmann's conscious approach to balance the new audience's expectations and his own personal interests, and therefore relevant and worthy of such detailed focus. Levi's thoughtful inquiry into the premises of microhistories predates by a few years Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi's concise historical compendium of microhistory theory's genesis.¹⁵ Particularly relevant for my thesis is the authors' discussion of the conflicting tensions arising from employing a microscopic dimension to the area of investigation without a macroscopic context. The historic specificity of a micro-historical approach cannot compensate for a lack of a larger framework. Introduced are

¹³ Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 95-97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, "Two or Three Things That I know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20:1 (1993), 10-35.

Siegfried Kracauer's considerations on this matter, in which he emphasizes that "the reconciliation between macro-and microhistory is not at all taken for granted [...] it needs to be pursued."¹⁶ Accordingly, while this research addresses a very definite time period, a very specific location and context in the life of Max Beckmann, the findings —only made possible through a close-up view — will become fully conclusive when transferred to a macroscopic perspective. Jill Lepore eloquently elaborated on this idea: "however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole."¹⁷

Arguably Max Beckmann's biography offers many different chapters, each warranting their separate micro-historical analyses. For this thesis, however, I am only interested in the last three years of Max Beckmann's life he spent in North America. A micro-historical study of those three years will reveal that Max Beckmann's activities emblematically reflect larger narratives affecting art and artists. At this point in time, artistic expression was in flux between being a symbol of individual expression and a vehicle of a common ideology. Where artists reacted in their art to their own personal experiences and reflected on political narratives, their artistic expressions were increasingly set into relation and in opposition to the cultural expressions promoted by the adversarial totalitarian regimes. Therefore, the micro-historical analysis contextualized in its macroscopic setting will reveal the overarching conditions that affected artists working in the United States, but also underlying aspects that arguably influenced all of post-war America.

The scholarship on Max Beckmann is extensive. Contributions dealing with the artist's North American oeuvre tend to have a strong stylistic focus. His paintings are considered to be representative of Beckmann's more peaceful disposition, while still being a medium for his primary concern for the construction of depth in space.¹⁸ The years he spent in the United States are described as a productive but concluding period where the artist was again free to exhibit and reconnect with society, his more serene expressions are featured as a reaction to the "pleasant"

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry*, 20:1 (1993), 27.

¹⁷ Jill Lepore, "Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *The Journal of American History* (2001), 133.

¹⁸ Lynette Roth, *Beckmann at the Saint Louis Art Museum. The Paintings* (Munich: Prestel, 2015), 182.

reception he encountered.¹⁹ However, these observations do not offer a close enough examination of the specific cultural, political and social environment that certainly influenced the artist.

In those instances where the North American cultural context is considered, the complexities of the immediate post-war reception of Max Beckmann are only cursorily addressed. Highlighted are Beckmann's achievements, the prizes and honors he received, and his ultimate liberation from oppression and realities of war-time Europe. Beckmann is described as benefiting from his past denunciation by Adolf Hitler,²⁰ and is praised also for his non-corruptibility — of staying true to his aesthetic expressions — both of which made him a “hero in the fight for modernism.”²¹ Occasionally mentioned is Beckmann's encountering of an adverse environment due to his German nationality,²² which “limited appreciation of his work for many long years,”²³ and that German art was not acceptable until the show *German Art of the Twentieth Century* in 1957.²⁴ However, such streamlined viewpoints ignore the attempts by advocates — Alfred Barr and Curt Valentin being the most prominent — who had been working incessantly to promote German Modernism since well before the Second World War and who were responsible for Beckmann's work to be included in over one hundred group and twenty solo exhibitions between 1947 and 1950 alone.²⁵ Overall, the general trope of the heroic modernist views the post-war years as a combination of newfound artistic freedom and opportunity in the land of “limitless possibilities and unrestricted aesthetic development.”²⁶

As Serge Guilbaut argued in his seminal work *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, it was a time period that has been mostly considered as “the ‘apolitical’ years sandwiched between two periods when art was directly and overtly associated with politics, [...] the years between the ‘social art’ of the depression and the use of Abstract Expressionism as propaganda in

¹⁹ Barbara Stehlé-Akhtar, “From Obscurity to Recognition: Max Beckmann in America” in *Max Beckmann in Exile*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 39.

²⁰ Penny Joy Bealle, “Obstacles and Advocates: Factors influencing the Introduction of Modern Art from Germany to New York City, 1912-33; Major Promoters and Exhibitions” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1990), 282.

²¹ Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, (Frankfurt: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 45.

²² Anja Tiedemann, *Die “Entartete” Moderne und Ihr Amerikanischer Markt. Karl Buchholz und Curt Valentin als Händler Verfemter Kunst* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), 233.

²³ Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Makela, *Of 'Truths Impossible to Put in Words.' Max Beckmann Contextualized* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 34.

²⁴ Anja Tiedemann, *Die “Entartete” Moderne und Ihr Amerikanischer Markt*, 233.

²⁵ Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2008), 61.

²⁶ Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, 55.

the fifties.”²⁷ Guilbaut develops the argument that these years were in fact anything but apolitical and describes the evolving “mass hysteria” towards the totalitarian regimes — particularly Communism — precisely during those early post-war years between 1947 and 1950. This hysteria manifested itself in distrust of Soviet expansionism, in fear of another armed conflict, but also in suspicion against those artists who were working in a non-figurative and abstracting manner as their work was supposedly aimed at social upheaval and revolution.

Max Beckmann was one among a large number of artists who had fled the developments and hostile conditions initiated by the terror regime of the National Socialists, including George Grosz, Max Ernst, Lyonel Feininger, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Many of them were indeed representative of the vibrant and at times controversial European avant-garde. Not everyone in the United States welcomed the enrichment of the cultural sphere and saw in the newcomers threatening and foreign influences, harmful to the academic art traditions, which made the post-war cultural scene a highly contested terrain.²⁸

I will propose that Max Beckmann was well aware of the charged environment in which he was working. His speeches and diary entries reveal that he was interested in world politics and associated with some of the most active and influential members of the cultural milieu who were taking action against the menacing ‘witch hunt’ of modern artists in the United States.²⁹ Indeed, Max Beckmann developed a substantial, influential circle of friends and acquaintances. Time and

²⁷ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 11.

²⁸ A prime example of such attitudes is provided in Congressman George Dondero’s speech *Modern Art Shackled to Communism*: “Where does ‘art with a social protest’ cross the borderline, if any exists, and become ‘art with a political murder?’ How did we ever let this horde of art distortionists, these international art thugs descend upon us? [...] Not only do they persist in jamming this art trash down the throats of the public, but they have effectively aided in excluding the works of our real American artist from exhibitions and competitions, by loading the juries against the academic artists. We are now face to face with the intolerable situation [...] invaded by a horde of art manglers.” In “Modern Art Shackled to Communism,” Speech of Hon. George A. Dondero of Michigan in the House of Representatives, Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 81st Congress, First session, Tuesday, August 16, 1949. *George Anthony Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0460.

²⁹ “All-Arts Group Set Up to Fight ‘Witch Hunters.’ A new organization of actors, dramatists, writers and others associated with all of the arts to combat national and state loyalty investigations and other alleged censorship and suppression of artistic freedoms was formed yesterday at a meeting of 200 persons at the Savoy-Plaza. [...] The following declaration, signed by those present, [...]: ‘we hold that an atmosphere of freedom is vital to our work. The witch hunters, with their terrified band of servants acting as self-appointed censors and critics are directing a campaign of intimidation and terror against American artists and writers. From a rapidly repeating attack on thought and its expression a pattern emerges uncomfortably reminiscent of the ‘Ministry of Enlightenment’ of the late Dr. Paul Josef Goebbels. We hold that denial of our freedom to create is denial of the people’s right to see and hear us. It is denial of their right to think. We accept judgement of our work only by the people. Our heritage is freedom. We hold in contempt all who would debase this heritage.’” In *New York Herald Tribune*, Wednesday, February 25, 1948. “Newspaper Clippings,” *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0895.

again, these relations have been downplayed or ignored.³⁰ More recent analyses have mentioned Beckmann's social contacts,³¹ starting to contest the often stated assumption that the artist's American network is confined to the German intellectual immigrant circle, but these still fail to examine such friendships or connections for their placement within the complex socio-cultural and political setting. In this regard, his ties to Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Alfred H. Barr Jr., Stuyvesant van Veen, Horst W. Janson, amongst others, and his membership with the Artist Equity Association, have not been adequately addressed.³²

Archival research will establish a more complete picture of Beckmann's large social network and his engagement within the political sphere. Such an approach will make possible a careful analysis of the art world into which Beckmann was immersed, the art world being understood through Howard Becker's definition as the "complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens."³³ For it was collectors, art dealers, curators, journalists and art associations that had a crucial impact on Beckmann's activities and experiences during the post war period. The artist's letters, statements and the speeches he produced before his death in 1950, as yet underutilized by scholars, will allow us to document his social relationships and interactions. A more thorough examination of the curation, reception and context of the exhibitions that Beckmann took part in, will provide a more comprehensive and overdue analysis of the artist who was very alive to his charged American environment and who needs to be placed within it by scholarship.

Max Beckmann: An Exiled Dissident

From the beginning of Max Beckmann's artistic career, he was exposed to the growing tensions playing out in the cultural political field in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. He was born 1884 in Leipzig and studied art in Weimar and Paris from 1899 to 1903. A year later

³⁰ Most recently in Sabine Rewald, *Max Beckmann in New York*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 29-32. Rewald states that Beckmann seems to not have made friends with other artists while living in New York, although three pages later she acknowledges his friendship with the muralist Stuyvesant van Veen and his wife, Felicia.

³¹ Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, 54.

³² For example, see Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, 44. While this source mentions that a party was given in honor of the artist by Artist Equity, his membership thereof is not disclosed.

³³ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1.

he moved to Berlin where recognition of his work came as early as 1906 when he joined and started exhibiting with the Secessionists, an artist group opposed to academic art. The same year, he was the recipient of the Villa Romana Prize, an award that had just recently been established by the German painter Max Klinger to offer patronage to young and emerging artists who may not be able to benefit from training and support systems by the official establishment.³⁴ This prize included a travel bursary and allowed Beckmann to live and work in Florence for six months.³⁵

Shortly before the onset of the First World War, Max Beckmann was directly involved in the “*Bremer Künstlerstreit*,” one of the earliest controversies in Germany surrounding modern art which had been brought about by the acquisition of Vincent van Gogh’s *Poppy Field* by the Bremen Kunsthalle. Carl Vinnen, a German artist, had authored a public protest letter claiming foreign art’s negative influence on German art and alleging radical tendencies in the new art forms. Beckmann was among several young artists who objected to Vinnen’s accusations and intolerant rhetoric. He signed an opposition statement authored by the artist Franz Marc, but did not fully agree with Marc’s championing of the newly emerging French abstract tendencies either. Beckmann felt that Marc’s vision of “timely” art was too exclusionary and did not leave room for art forms, like his own, that dissented from the dominant French trends. His response “Thoughts on Timely and Untimely Art,” published in 1912 in the avant-garde journal *Pan*, was not only Beckmann’s first public statement concerning cultural politics, but it also marked the development of Beckmann’s determined stance that only an individualist approach to painting could communicate meaning and thus should have priority over popular stylistic tendencies and art groups.³⁶ In 1914 he elaborated on these ideas when he wrote for *The New Program*:³⁷ “As for myself, I paint and try to develop my style exclusively in terms of deep space, something that in contrast to superficially decorative art penetrates as far as possible into the very core of nature and the spirit of things.”³⁸

³⁴ “Villa Romana Preis,” Villa Romana website, http://www.villaromana.org/front_content.php?idcat=11

³⁵ Henning Bock and Johann Heinrich Müller (eds.), *Max Beckmann. Gemälde und Aquarelle der Sammlung Stephan Lackner, USA* (Bremen: Kunsthalle Bremen, 1966), 6.

³⁶ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Max Beckmann: Self-Portrait in Words*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 115.

³⁷ Published by Karl Scheffler, also editor of Germany’s main art journal, *Kunst und Künstler*, *The New Program* gave younger artists the opportunity to publish statements about new tendencies in art. Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Max Beckmann. Self-Portrait in Words*, 130-131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

After having volunteered to work as a health care assistant in Flanders at the onset of World War I in 1914 — and being released shortly after in 1915 due to a mental breakdown — Beckmann became interested in Christianity, mystery cults and Gnosticism.³⁹ He remained involved in the political questions concerning the cultural sphere, and started to capture in his works the torment and desperation of what would soon become the Weimar Republic. He made ardent, political statements about art in speeches and articles that he authored.⁴⁰ In his *Artistic Credo*, published in 1918, he addresses his ideas concerning the artist's political involvement:

Well, we have had four years of staring straight into the stupid face of horror... I certainly hope we are finished with much of the past. Finished with the mindless imitation of visible reality; [...] I hope we will achieve a transcendental objectivity out of a deep love for nature and humanity. [...] Perhaps with the decline of business, perhaps (something I hardly dare hope) with the development of the communistic principle, the love of objects for their own sake will become stronger. I believe this is the only possibility open to us for achieving a great universal style.⁴¹

In the following year, Beckmann published his well-known lithograph portfolio *Hölle* (Hell), commissioned by the famed art dealer Israel Ber Neumann and a response to the revolutionary events of 1918-1919 in Germany. The portfolio reflects Beckmann's war-time experiences and the artist's displeasure with the political direction Germany was headed.⁴² The portfolio also reflects Beckmann's shift of his prior preoccupation with religious themes to a greater interest in political topics in his art.⁴³ Although he does not seem to have been an active member or supporter of any political party or group, his artistic expressions and statement reveal that he was "drawn to ideals of pacifism, socialism, and radical change."⁴⁴

Beckmann discussed artists' political roles and responsibilities in an article he wrote in 1927 for the conservative publication *European Review*, titled "The Artist and the State."⁴⁵ Both article and publication were characterized by the post-war anticipation of change and cultural

³⁹ Amy K. Hamlin, "Figuring Redemption: Christianity and Modernity in Max Beckmann's *Resurrections*," in *ReVisioning: Critical Methods of Seeing Christianity in the History of Art*, ed. James Romaine and Linda Starford (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 294-309.

⁴⁰ Rose-Carol Washon Long and Maria Makela, *Of 'Truths Impossible to Put in Words'*, 108.

⁴¹ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 185.

⁴² Barbara Copeland Buenger, "Max Beckmann's Ideologues: Some Forgotten Faces," *The Art Bulletin*, September 1989, Vol. 71, No. 3, 469-472.

⁴³ Amy Kelly Hamlin, "Between Form and Subject: Max Beckmann's Critical Reception and Development, ca. 1906-1924" (PhD diss., New York University, 2007), 167.

⁴⁴ Barbara Copeland Buenger, "Max Beckmann's Ideologues: Some Forgotten Faces," *The Art Bulletin*, September 1989, Vol. 71, No. 3, 455.

⁴⁵ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 284.

reformation during the revolutionary period. Beckmann addressed the artist's anticipated role for the establishment of this new culture:

We seek a kind of aristocratic Bolshevism. A social equalization, the fundamental principle of which, however, is not the satisfaction of pure materialism, but rather the conscious and organized drive to become God ourselves.... This is humanity's goal. Humanity's new faith, new hope, new religion. Bolshevism took the first steps toward the fulfillment of this vision by the state. Yet what Bolshevism lacks is art and a new faith. It lacks centralization – the dogmatic centralization of this faith, as well as a centralization of art in this faith.⁴⁶

Some of Beckmann's most enigmatic abstractions were painted in the Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933, *The Night*, *Descent from the Cross* and *Christ Taken in Adultery* being especially well-known examples. He furthered his highly individualist stance, continued to work in a way that defied classification and refused to be associated with any of the art groupings around him.⁴⁷

Beckmann was able to exhibit internationally and to considerably widen his professional network.⁴⁸ He accepted the offer of a teaching position at the art academy of the Städelsches Museum in Frankfurt and signed a contract with Israel Ber Neumann, who — after immigrating to New York in 1923 — took it upon himself to establish a constant presence of the artist in America. Meanwhile, the director of the National Gallery in Berlin, Ludwig Justi, had advocated for a separate museum space entirely devoted to showcase the art of contemporary and living artists, a first even among the more progressive institutes of the Weimar Republic. The Berlin Kronprinzenpalais was chosen as venue for this undertaking, even though, considering the ambitious plans of Justi, it had only limited exhibition space. Among his progressive curatorial strategies was the dedication of entire rooms to the works of singular artists. This privilege was

⁴⁶ His speech, influenced by gnostic and kabalistic beliefs, was considered radical for the paper, so much so, that the publisher felt the need to insert a disclaimer, rejecting any kind of association with “certain extreme metaphysical conclusions.” Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 288.

⁴⁷ Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Makela, *Of 'Truths Impossible to Put in Words,'* 87.

⁴⁸ He developed close connections to many influential people such as Georg Swarzenski (director of the Sättdelsche art institute in Frankfurt at the time) and Gregor and Lilly von Schnitzler, influential members of German social and political spheres; in: Ursula Harter and Stephan von Wiese, *Max Beckmann und J.B. Neumann. Der Künstler und sein Händler in Briefen und Dokumenten 1917-1950* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König), 136.

only ever given to five artists, Max Beckmann being one of them.⁴⁹ Justi inaugurated the Beckmann-Hall in 1933 featuring ten of his paintings.⁵⁰

Beckmann's success was dampened when Hitler assumed power in Germany and almost immediately started his attacks on modern art. These attacks became more prevalent and Beckmann's work was included in defamatory group shows that travelled through several German cities.⁵¹ Hitler's politics of *Gleichschaltung* (the regimentation of all aspects of society to conform to the Nazis' ideological schemes) also allowed civil servants to be fired if they did not conform to party policies. Thirty-five museum directors and departmental heads lost their jobs overnight, as well as dozens of professors and art teachers, including Beckmann. All cultural production, including reception and criticism, was subjected to censorship.⁵²

The politicization of arts continued by declaring artists — those accused of subverting German culture — enemies of the state, which in turn justified their persecution.⁵³ Max Beckmann was considered to be such an artist and was denied membership in the official painter's guild, the *Reichskulturkammer*.⁵⁴ While other artists had worse fates than him — receiving the dreaded “*Malverbot*,” a complete interdiction of artistic activity — Beckmann was severely limited in his practice.⁵⁵ It did not take long for Justi's Beckmann-Hall to be closed down, even though some of his more innocuous works were still hanging in the museum until 1937.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the situation in Germany grew more and more troublesome. Beckmann's awareness of its seriousness is spelled out in the correspondence between Beckmann and the

⁴⁹ Those artists were Emil Nolde, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Franz Marc. Kurt Winkler, “Ludwig Justi und der Expressionismus. Zur Musealisierung der Avantgarde,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2010), 85.

⁵⁰ Uwe Fleckner, *Das Verfemte Meisterwerk: Schicksalswege moderner Kunst im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), 114.

⁵¹ Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, Christian Lenz and Beatrice von Bormann, *Max Beckmann: Exile in Amsterdam*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz: 2007), 16.

⁵² Christoph Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*,” *Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2007), 42.

⁵³ Q.v.: On May 21, 1933, the *Völkische Beobachter* (the leading newspaper of the Nazi party) proclaimed, “So long as an unpolitical, neutral, liberalistic, individual art is left in Germany our task has not been done. The artist who disregards this demand will be persecuted as an enemy of the nation.” In: Kurt Pinthus, “Culture Inside Germany,” *The American Scholar* (1940:9 no. 4), 483.

⁵⁴ Uwe M. Schneede, *Die Geschichte der Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: von den Avantgarden bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C.H. Beck, 2001), 170.

⁵⁵ Sara Eskilsson Werwig, “Ein Gemälde geht ins Exil. Auf den Spuren der ‘Kreuzabnahme’ von Max Beckmann”, in *Das Verfemte Meisterwerk. Schicksalswege Moderner Kunst im “Dritten Reich”* ed. Uwe Fleckner, 114.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

gallerist Günter Franke in January and February of 1934, in which Beckmann urges Franke not to exhibit any of his work, even privately, as it could generate “the wrong impression.” If Franke insists, Beckmann asks him to only exhibit “discretely selected work” and not to organize any parties for his upcoming fiftieth birthday. Beckmann adds: “The time will come where I will see justice. [...] Until now I consider a quiet growth into the time – without sacrificing any personal beliefs – as the best solution.”⁵⁷

A large number of Beckmann’s works were confiscated from museums and galleries in 1937. The complete listing of “*Entartete Kunst*,” made publicly available by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2014, illustrates the extent of the unprecedented iconoclasm: seventy-six of his works were taken from the Kupferstichkabinett, seventeen from the National Gallery in Berlin; ninety-four of his works were seized from the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt, forty-seven from the museum in Chemnitz, and fourteen from the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, to name only a handful of the affected museums.⁵⁸ In total, about five hundred Beckmann works were removed from German institutions.⁵⁹ Many of these art works ended up in the so-called “*Verwertungsaktionen*,” the subsequent sale for government profit carried out by the likes of Hildebrand Gurlitt and Karl Buchholz.⁶⁰ Some of Beckmann’s art dealers, Karl Buchholz and Curt Valentin in Berlin for example, but also Günter Franke in Munich, resisted orders of the Nazi party and courageously kept showing his work.

For the opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst on July 18, 1937, an exhibition of what was supposed to be Germany’s finest and best artistic productions was organized with exuberant theatrical pomp in Munich.⁶¹ Hearing Hitler’s programmatic, hate-filled speech on the radio, Beckmann decided to leave Germany with his wife Mathilde ‘Quappi’⁶² Beckmann.⁶³ He left only a few hours before the opening of the travelling exhibit *Degenerate Art*, counterpart to the

⁵⁷ Klaus Gallwitz, Uwe M. Schneede, and Stephan von Wiese, with Barbara Golx, *Max Beckmann: Briefe*, Vol. II, (Munich: R. Piper, 1993), 240.

⁵⁸ “Entartete” Kunst: digital reproduction of a typescript inventory prepared by the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, ca. 1941/1942. (V&A NAL MSL/1996/7) London: Victoria and Albert Museum, January 2014. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/entartetekunst>

⁵⁹ John Henry Merryman, Albert E. Elsen, and Stephen K. Urice, *Law, Ethics and the Visual Arts* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Kluwer Law International, 2007), 641.

⁶⁰ Eskilsson Werwigk, “Ein Gemälde geht ins Exil” in *Das Verfemete Meisterwerk*, ed. Uwe Fleckner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), 125.

⁶¹ Other publications deal with this topic in more detail, for example: Olaf Peters, *Degenerate Art. The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937* (Munich: Prestel, 2014).

⁶² Quappi is the nickname of Max Beckmann’s second wife Mathilde Beckmann, née Kaulbach (1904-1986).

⁶³ Ursula Harter and Stephan von Wiese, *Max Beckmann und J.B. Neumann*, 240.

aforementioned exhibition, which included ten of his paintings and a number of his graphic art works. In this exhibition, conceived to illustrate the “artistic, sculptural and painterly degeneration,”⁶⁴ Beckmann was ostracized for being a “cultural Bolshevik,”⁶⁵ and painting in a style that was considered “un-German” and decadent.

A year later, in 1938 the New Burlington Art Galleries in London organized the exhibition *Twentieth-Century German Art* which featured Beckmann’s work alongside other persecuted German artists. It was conceived in response to the *Degenerate Art* show and was therefore in itself a political event. For the occasion Beckmann traveled with his friend and subsequent patron Stephan Lackner from Amsterdam to London to deliver his speech ‘On my Painting,’⁶⁶ in which he stressed that he had never been politically active and the only reason he felt the need to speak out that day was due to the catastrophic state of the world. “The greatest danger that threatens humanity is collectivism. Everywhere attempts are being made to lower the happiness and the way of living of mankind to the level of termites. I am against these attempts with all the strength of my being.”⁶⁷

Beckmann’s veiled references and downright dismissal of his own political statements⁶⁸ need to be viewed in relation to the longstanding accusations and defamations of being a Bolshevik and having radical tendencies, but also to the appeasement policy England was practicing during this time.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it is one of the very few instances in which Beckmann made a relatively direct reference to the oppression of the Nazi regime and it was also the last time he spoke publicly in Europe.

The “*Verwertungsaktionen*” by the authorized German art dealers were ultimately responsible for the fact that large numbers of Beckmann works found their way to North

⁶⁴ Adolf Hitler’s speech, quoted in Ines Schlenker, “Defining National Socialist Art,” in *Degenerate Art. The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany 1937*, ed. Olaf Peters, 90.

⁶⁵ Olaf Peters, *Degenerate Art. The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany 1937*, 30.

⁶⁶ Sean Rainbird, “Afterword” in *Max Beckmann, On My Painting – Max Beckmann* (London: Tate, 2003), 23.

⁶⁷ “I have always on principle been against the artist’s speaking about himself or his work. Today neither vanity nor ambition causes me to talk about matters that generally are not to be expressed even to oneself. But the world is in such a catastrophic state and art is so bewildered that I, who have lived the last thirty years almost as a hermit, am forced to leave my snails’ shell to express these few ideas which, with much labour, I have come to understand in the course of the years. The greatest danger that threatens humanity is collectivism. Everywhere attempts are being made to lower the happiness and the way of living of mankind to the level of termites. I am against these attempts with all the strength of my being.” Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Max Beckmann. Self-Portrait in Words*, 305.

⁶⁸ Rose-Carol Washton-Long and Maria Makela, *Of ‘Truths Impossible to Put in Words’: Max Beckmann Contextualized*, 134.

⁶⁹ Stephan Lackner was part of the organizing committee and Beckmann therefore must have been aware of the political implications of the London show. Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Max Beckmann. Self-Portrait in Words*, 300.

America. Indeed, the largest collection of Beckmann works today is housed at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Already in 1939 Beckmann had received an invitation to travel to the United States from the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Daniel Catton Rich,⁷⁰ but the onset of World War II that same year thwarted those plans.⁷¹ Finally, in 1947, after ten years of Dutch exile and being cleared as a non-enemy, Beckmann was granted the necessary visa to come to the United States. There he spent the last three years of his life and would enter yet another highly productive phase, producing eighty-five oil paintings. Yet, as earlier suggested, the transition into the North American art and cultural scene was indeed complex.

Curt Valentin and Perry T. Rathbone had pulled out all the stops to obtain a teaching position at the Washington University in St. Louis for the artist,⁷² which was crucially important for Beckmann to have his visa granted.⁷³ Beckmann was elated and optimistic about the new chapter in his life, although his teaching position was a temporary replacement for Philip Guston, a successful painter and later one of the most prominent Abstract Expressionist artists, who had received a Guggenheim fellowship and had therefore taken a leave of absence in Europe.⁷⁴ The uncertainty of his employment and financial instability added to Beckmann's worries. He voiced his concerns on November 14, 1948: "I will probably be kicked out of here, as Mr. P.G. will most likely reassume his job. The sales of my paintings are becoming slower and smaller – money is dwindling [...] slowly I am being demoted from racehorse to cab horse."⁷⁵ In order to make ends meet, Beckmann accepted several speaking engagements and offers to teach, which led the artist to travel through large parts of the country.⁷⁶ Beckmann's renewed, albeit cautious, interest and desire to comment on the arts in his new surroundings, relate on one hand to his uncertain economic situation, on the other to the impulses provided by the stimulating environment in which he found himself. These impulses cannot factor out the political implications arising in the

⁷⁰ Olaf Peters, *Vom Schwarzen Seiltänzer. Max Beckmann zwischen Weimarer Republik und Exil* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005), 310.

⁷¹ Klaus von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden: Kunst und Gesellschaft 1905-1955* (München: Beck, 2005), 801.

⁷² Sabine Rewald, *Max Beckmann in New York*, 6.

⁷³ Beckmann had attempted to move to the U.S. but the occupation of the Netherlands impeded the artist's emigration. Stephanie Barron, Sabine Eckmann, and Matthew Affron, *Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 27.

⁷⁴ Lynette Roth, *Max Beckmann at the St. Louis Art Museum. The Paintings* (Munich, New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 182.

⁷⁵ Erhard Göpel and Mathilde Q. Beckmann, *Max Beckmann Tagebücher 1940 – 1950* (Munich: Langen – Müller Verlag, 1955), 286.

⁷⁶ A listing of Beckmann's residences and travel destinations is included in the Appendix.

reception of modern art during the next three years and deserve a closer examination in relation to the artist's social and professional sphere.

Pre-McCarthy Fears Of Reds and Others

On September 11, 1949, in a *New York Times* article titled "Modernism Under Fire," Howard Devree declared: "Modern art, which has withstood charges that it is distorted, unintelligible, unreal, specious, ugly, et cetera, has in recent months been faced with a new and most fantastic charge of all – that it is Communist."⁷⁷ Devree's statement articulates a striking development in the reception of art that marked the era when Beckmann lived and worked in the United States. Paradoxically, a political vilification of domestic artistic expression took place simultaneously to the intensifying efforts of championing modern art forms abroad to impart the advantages of a free and democratic society.⁷⁸

It was an era in the United States which saw an unprecedented conflation of art and politics with far reaching implications for the way modern art was received. One of the first instances in which the U.S. government became directly involved with the arts in a major way was the "New Deal", a series of domestic programs established and operated to combat the effect of the Great Depression between 1933 and 1938.⁷⁹ In 1936, the political climate in Europe precipitated the election of the French *Front Populaire*, a mass social movement and short-lived coalition of leftist and antifascist parties. Other progressive movements in Europe and North America sought a similar alliance of the centre and the left.⁸⁰ In fact, Christopher Vials points out that "for the first time, an overwhelming majority saw fascism, not communism, as the greatest threat to world security."⁸¹ In the United States, The Popular Front attracted progressive intellectuals and courted artists to participate in the movement. The Artist's Union, which was formerly known as the Unemployed Artists Group, had tried to improve the economic conditions for artists, by promoting plans such as the Public Works of Art Project, now became part of the

⁷⁷ Howard Devree, "Modernism under Fire. Newest Attack is Full of Contradiction," *New York Times*, Sept 11, 1949, X6.

⁷⁸ Casey Nelson Blake, *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007), 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁰ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, 19.

⁸¹ Christopher Vials, *Haunted by Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight Against Fascism in the United States* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 51.

Popular Front movement.⁸² Renamed again in 1938, the United American Artists actively engaged in demonstrations and picket lines in their fight for economic security. Undoubtedly, artistic expressions became much more politically coded. The Communist movement, for example, was predominantly associated with realist social commentary in art, while abstract art had been viewed as isolated from social reality, a characteristic which Guilbaut called “self-imposed neutrality.”⁸³ Abstractions were considered to be governed by their own rules, disconnected from a social and political context, a view which was further advocated by Alfred Barr in his essay “Cubism and Abstract Art” in 1936.⁸⁴

Meyer Shapiro, a Marxist social art historian, provided a shift in such discourse when he published in 1937 “Nature of Abstract Art” in the first issue of *Marxist Quarterly*.⁸⁵ Shapiro argued, contrary to Barr, that all art, even the most abstract, is rooted in the conditions under which it is produced and therefore inevitably makes social statement, rather than being just a product of an ivory tower.⁸⁶ Thus, according to Shapiro’s reasoning, to work in the abstract vein was also a legitimate way for artists to express socially critical concerns and potentially have ties with political movements. Arguably, it was this conceptual shift that played into the ensuing confusion and already existing suspiciousness of the “Philistines,” as Barr called the adversaries of modern art, who saw modern abstract art as an attempt to destruct existing political and social order from within.

Growing disillusionment during the Second World War led many North American intellectuals to abandon their support of the communist cause and the Popular Front was dismantled in 1939. In the meantime, the American State Department had set up its ‘Division of Cultural Relations’ in 1938, which was conceived to target the German and Italian dictatorships’ growing economic and intellectual influence in South America. In fact, John Henry Merryman identified “a pathological fear of communist infiltration,”⁸⁷ which would provoke accusations against foreign artistic influences and which would affect many artists and their practices. Even Alfred H. Barr Jr., former director at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who was

⁸² Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left. American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁴ Washton-Long and Makela, *Of 'Truths Impossible to Put in Words,'* 33.

⁸⁵ Meyer Shapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” *The Marxist Quarterly* 1:1 (January-March, 1937): 83.

⁸⁶ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole Idea of Modern Art*, 25.

⁸⁷ John Henry Merryman, Albert E. Elsen, Stephen K Urice, *Law, Ethics and the Visual Arts*, 644.

influential and instrumental in the fight for acceptance of modern art in the U.S., was not safe from the scrutiny of the government.⁸⁸ In 1940, before he was cleared to work for the government on the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense, a “complete and thorough investigation [...] to establish the extent of the patriotism, loyalty, integrity and trustworthiness” needed to be conducted. His contribution to defend modern art, his “interest in political refugees,” as well as his travels to Russia, further spurred already existing distrust for the art advocate. Particularly in the post-war years, Barr tried to counter anti-modernist sentiments with lectures and speeches.⁸⁹ He tried in vain to clear up the claim that modern art could be a communistic, subversive threat, affirming that the totalitarian regimes of Europe themselves had denounced those very art forms.⁹⁰

One of the greatest instigators of communist accusations against artists was George Anthony Dondero, a Michigan Republican representative in Congress. Along with a number of other Congressmen, he frequently denounced modern art. He had no formal training in art history, but saw in modern artists “those misguided disciples who bore from within to destroy the high standards and priceless tradition of academic art”, and stated that “only if the hard-working,

⁸⁸ The results of this investigation, which were compiled in 1954, lists Barr’s connection to the *Daily Worker*, specifically declared as an East Coast Communist publication, and named Alfred H. Barr Jr. to be “one of 313 educators, writers, scientists, artists and clergymen who signed an open letter to members of the 81st Congress urging the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee.” It further states that “a confidential informant of known reliability has advised that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., [...] was a member of the American Russian Institute in 1938.” Letter from John Edgar Hoover, Federal Bureau of Investigation, to the Special Agent in Charge, December 28, 1940, Declassified material from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Records Management Division. FOIPA: 1342652.

⁸⁹ In November, 1946, Alfred H. Barr delivered a speech “The Modern Scene,” at Brown University as part of the Marshall Woods Lecture series, in which he “discussed the question of the freedom of the artist in relation to the modern world and modern state,” according to the *Brown Daily Herald* of November, 1946. In May, 1947 he contributed to the annual *American Federation of Arts Conference* his speech “Art under Totalitarian Governments.” Both speeches were harbingers to his later and well-known lecture “Art under the Dictatorships,” which he presented several times in the coming decade. *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3149:1124 and 11283.

Other key sources: Barr, *What is Modern Painting?* (New York: MoMA, 1943) and Barr, “Is Modern Art Communistic?” (1952) reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 670-73. See also Patricia Hills, “‘Truth, Freedom, Perfection’: Alfred Barr’s *What is Modern Painting?* as Cold War Rhetoric,” in *Pressing the Fight: Print, Propaganda, and the Cold War*, ed. Greg Barnhisel and Catherine Turner (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 251-75.

⁹⁰ Without naming Barr directly, Congressman George A. Dondero acknowledged these efforts: “Quite a few individuals in art, [...] have written to me [...] that so-called modern or contemporary art cannot be Communist because art in Russia today is realistic and objective. The left-wing art magazines advance the same unsound premises of reasoning, asserting in editorial spasm that modern art is real American art. They plead for tolerance but in turn tolerate nothing except their own subversive ‘isms.’” Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 81st Congress, First session. “Modern Art Shackled to Communism.” Speech of Hon. George A. Dondero of Michigan. In the house of Representatives. Tuesday, August 16, 1949: *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0460.

right-thinking patriotic proponents of academic art [...] rejected Communists, could traditional art be preserved and cultural institutions [be] cleansed”.⁹¹ In his inflammatory and denigrating rhetoric, Dondero identified perceived radical artistic expression to be on equal footing with political radicalism. His tirade against the “isms” in American art — in which he declared the new art forms as “un-American” and as representing the communist front — was motivated by a desire to eliminate all foreign influences, a desire which further perpetuated the modernist-traditionalist divide, and was indicative of how much art and politics were intertwined.⁹² In Congress, Dondero unleashed countless attacks on artists working in the modern vein:

The role of the Red artist is not one of sympathy, but is an active role in the battle for world control by the communists [...] we are dealing with a subtle enemy. Let every loyal citizen be on guard against this insidious menace to our way of life. [...] It is not my purpose to suggest that newspapers should clap censorship on their art critics, but I do say that, if this condition of overemphasis and an attempt to glorify the vulgar, distorted and the perverted has come about due to neglect and lack of proper supervision, then it is high time that some of our newspapers start cleaning house in the smaller compartments of their organizations.[...] it is my firm conviction that the time has come when the loyal, patriotic, clean-minded, right-thinking artists of this country must rouse themselves, band together and purge their establishment of this social disease.⁹³

Concurrent to Dondero’s attacks but prompted by the emerging bipolar global power structures and fear of Communist expansion, the U.S. government explored different strategies by which to stress democracy and freedom of expression. One of these strategies was the circulation of an art exhibition titled *Advancing American Art: Politics and Aesthetics in the U.S.*

⁹¹ “The human art termites, disciples of multiple ‘isms’ that compose so-called modern art, boring industriously to destroy the high standards and priceless traditions of academic art, find comfort and satisfaction in the wide dissemination of this spurious reasoning and wickedly false declaration. And its casual acceptance by the unwary.[...] Let me trace for you a main artery from the black heart of the isms of the Russian Revolution to the very heart of art in America.[...] we are now face to face with the intolerable situation, where public schools, colleges, and universities, [...] invaded by a horde of foreign art manglers, are selling to our young men and women a subversive doctrine of ‘isms,’ Communist-inspired and Communist-connected which have one common, boasted goal – the destruction of our cultural tradition and priceless heritage. [...] The communist art that has infiltrated our cultural front is not the Communist art in Russia today- one is the weapon of destruction, and the other is the medium of controlled propaganda. Communist art of outside of Russia is to destroy the enemy, and we are the enemy of communism. Communist art in Russia is to delude the Russian workers.” “Modern Art Shackled to Communism,” Speech of Hon. George A. Dondero of Michigan in the House of Representatives, Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 81st Congress, First session, Tuesday, August 16, 1949, *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0460.

⁹² John Henry Merryman et al., *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts*, 644.

⁹³ “Communists Maneuver to Control Art in the United States,” speech by Hon. George A. Dondero of Michigan in the House of Representatives, Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 81st Congress, First Session, March 25, 1949, *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0458.

State Department Exhibition. It was a small collection of seventy-nine paintings purchased by J. Leroy Davidson,⁹⁴ an art historian who had earlier been employed by the War Department and now worked for the State Department's International art program, to visualize the benefits of democracy and to demonstrate that Americans indeed had an appreciation for art and artists.⁹⁵ It first opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1946, and then was anticipated to tour Europe and South America.

Among the selected artists were Philip Guston, Karl Zerbe and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. As soon as plans for the exhibition were announced, they became caught up in a situation in which several news outlets denounced the selection of artworks for its extreme tendencies and emphasis of "isms." If one were to believe a report by the *New York Times* from October 3, 1946, for example, Mr. Davidson had assembled work "[...] which represents 'radical' development. Overwhelmingly preponderant are canvases belonging in categories of extreme expressionism, fantasy, surrealism, and abstraction [...] and he [...] made no attempt to present a rounded report on contemporary painting in America."⁹⁶

But it was not only the extreme and avant-garde art forms that caused uproar. The participating artists, selected to showcase the benefits of democracy abroad, were accused of communist ties themselves.⁹⁷ Several news outlets started denouncing the works, particularly the Hearst chain of newspapers and *LOOK Magazine* (Figure 1),⁹⁸ which stated that "The State department collection concentrates with biased frenzy on what is incomprehensible, ugly or

⁹⁴ Michael L. Krenn, *Fallout Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 27.

⁹⁵ Merryman et al., 647.

⁹⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, "State Department Art Show Sponsor," *New York Times*, October 3, 1946, 25.

⁹⁷ Merryman, et al., 647.

⁹⁸ "By far the most important political attack on modern art of the 1940s was launched by academic artists against the State department's exhibitions of American paintings, which had been bought to send abroad. Late in the fall of 1946 the Hearst papers published every week a full page of illustrations of work by such artists as Stuart Davis, John Marin, Ben Shahn, and Kuniyoshi with quotations assailing the exhibitions by Dean Cornwell, Charles R. Knight, Eugene Speicher and other conservatives. *LOOK Magazine* published a spread reproducing a dozen of the pictures on order to show how the American taxpayers' money had been spent. Pressure mounted and finally Secretary Marshall ordered the shows withdrawn for the good [...] After the shows were withdrawn Congressman Busbey renewed his assault on the State Department show and published a list of 24 of the 45 artists with citations from the files of the Un-American Activities Committee as evidence that they were subversive. I've studied these citations carefully and conclude that half-a-dozen of the 45 artists were in fact Communists or loyal party-liners. At the same time, I am pretty sure that Congressman Busbey could not possibly have picked out which pictures were painted by the half-dozen Communists." "Modern Art – and Political Oppression," speech by Alfred H. Barr, February 11, 1955, Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C., *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3149:0897.

absurd.”⁹⁹ Various groups also protested Davidson’s selection, among them the American Artist Professional League. The accusations were underpinned by a fear of foreign political influence and a general mistrust against the government’s involvement with the arts.



Figure 1. “Your Money Bought These Paintings,” *LOOK Magazine*, Vol.11, February 18, 1947, 80.

The controversy reached a distressing climax when President Truman allowed himself to weigh in on the issue.¹⁰⁰ When viewing the selected artworks, he stopped at Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s painting *Circus Girl Resting* which he described as “a fat semi-nude, circus-girl,” adding that “the artist must have stood off from the canvas and thrown paint at it [...]. If that’s art, I’m a Hottentot,” he concluded.¹⁰¹ Truman’s comments were not only misogynist, racist and

⁹⁹ David M. Sokol, “The Founding of Artist Equity Association After World War II,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 39:1/2 (1999), 19.

¹⁰⁰ Jane Hart de Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” 777.

¹⁰¹ President Truman’s negative view of modern art revealed itself again in a letter to Secretary of State William Burnett Benton: “I am of the opinion that so-called modern art is merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people. An artistic production is one which shows infinite ability for taking pains and if any of these so-called modern paintings show any such infinite ability I am very much mistaken. There are great many American artists who still believe that the ability to make things look as they are is the first requisite of a great artists – they do not belong to the so-called

unqualified, but also led Secretary of State George C. Marshall to actually cancel the show with the argument that there should be “no more taxpayers money for modern art.”¹⁰² The decision faced much opposition and was described as “one of the clearest cases of fascist-like censorship upon an entire level of American culture.”¹⁰³ Protests erupted from intellectuals and the press who were opposed to the repressive activities undertaken by government institutions and marked the beginning of what has been described as the cultural Cold War.¹⁰⁴ However, Marshall’s decision stood.

After the cancellation of the show, the paintings were declared “surplus” property by the War Assets Administration. The American Federation of Arts announced its interest in purchasing the entire lot of paintings at meeting held at the Whitney Museum, sponsored by the Artist Equity Association, where the works were on display.¹⁰⁵ In the end, the American Federation of Arts was not able to purchase the entire lot of works, as the paintings were sold to several different institutions. Ironically, the Hearst group bought five of the pictures for the Los Angeles County Museum, a museum largely supported by the publishing house.¹⁰⁶

The main target of Truman’s foul vilification, continued by Dondero in 1949, was Yasuo Kuniyoshi, a Japanese-born artist who had lived in the United States since he was 16 years old, but who had been legally unable to acquire U.S. citizenship due to his ancestry.¹⁰⁷ During World War II he was declared an ‘enemy alien’ after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He was put under house arrest, and subjected to prejudice and harassment. Kuniyoshi actively tried to overcome the discrimination based on his nationality and took on a role in the war efforts. To

modern school. There is no art at all in connection with the modernists, in my opinion.” Harry S. Truman letter to Assistant Secretary of State William Burnett Benton, cited in Alfred Barr’s speech *Patterns of Philistine Power*, in *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3149:0858.

¹⁰² Jane Hart de Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” 777; and Merryman et al., *Law, Ethics and the Visual Arts*, 648.

¹⁰³ The *Progressive Citizens of America*’s art division called a protest meeting in 1947 and published a pamphlet “The State Department and Art,” in: Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement*, 197.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement*, 198.

¹⁰⁵ “Group to Make Bid for ‘Surplus’ Art. American Federation Seeking State Department’s Paintings Now on Sale by the WAA,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1948, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Merryman, *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts*, 648.

¹⁰⁷ “Now let us take a look at the president of this so-called Artist Equity – he is Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Japanese born artist, whose career has been greatly aided by the many Marxist writers functioning in the art journals and on the pages of the metropolitan press as art critics,” in “Communists Maneuver to Control Art in the United States,” Speech of Hon. George A. Dondero in the House of Representatives, March 25, 1949: Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 81st Congress, First Session, *George A. Dondero Papers*, 1949-1965, reel 722:0453.

unequivocally show his allegiance to the U.S., he worked together with the government in the propaganda programs.¹⁰⁸

Kuniyoshi was also a very active member of the New York cultural and art scene, with a large circle of friends. Having been deeply involved in the conception of the Artist Equity Association in 1946, which was established primarily in response to the loss of opportunity for artists in the post-war economy, he was voted first president of the Association at the founding meeting. Kuniyoshi made it clear in a speech he held at the Museum of Modern Art at the association's first membership meeting in 1947, that the Artist Equity Association "will not take part in aesthetic controversy," nor does it represent any school or "ism" and will not allow for the group to be "used as a political pressure group." Nevertheless, Artist Equity condemned the cancellation of *Advancing American Art*, calling it "a threat to freedom of expression for workers in all the arts."¹⁰⁹

The denunciation of Kuniyoshi was not an isolated incident, however. Dondero later expanded his attacks to include the association as well and repeatedly proclaimed in Congress that Artist Equity was a Communist front organization and its members were "red frontiers" that had "spread its tentacles into the very fibre of our artistic life" to control the museums and federal subsidies for art.¹¹⁰ The disgraceful episode of the *Advancing American Art* and the denunciation of Artist Equity Association provides a glimpse into the charged North American environment Max Beckmann entered when he arrived in New York City that very year.

Making Connections: A Social Meshwork for Max Beckmann

Max Beckmann's North American network has not been analyzed sufficiently in existing literature, a notion emblemized by Stefana Sabin's 2012 statement in *Beckmann & Amerika* that he was not an exile in the normal sense, as he did not even try to adapt socially and

¹⁰⁸ Alexandra Munroe, "The War Years and Their Aftermath: 1940–1953," in *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Centennial Retrospective Exhibition*, Exh. cat. (Kyoto: The National Museum of Modern Art, in association with Nippon Television Corporation, Tokyo, 1989), 38-44.

¹⁰⁹ Undated speech by Yasuo Kuniyoshi to be held at the Museum of Modern Art, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers*, Subject Files: Artists' Equity Association 1946-1952, undated. Box 1, Folder 20, slide 18-20.

¹¹⁰ "Congressional Record – House," March 17, 1952, *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:2460.

linguistically.¹¹¹ Such claims are unfounded. Indeed, in countless diary entries, as early as 1945,¹¹² Beckmann mentions his efforts to learn English in anticipation of his emigration and integration into the new society.¹¹³ By the late 1940s, Beckmann even started writing correspondence and parts of his diary entries in English. A closer analysis of Beckmann's network in the United States will reveal that he and his wife Quappi were also well connected and participated in the rich cultural offerings of their new environment.

Beckmann already had an extraordinary support network in North America when he arrived in New York City on September 8, 1947 and began immediately to make the acquaintance of many influential members of the art world. Since the 1920s, his work had been consistently exhibited in the U.S.¹¹⁴ Even during World War II, a time when exhibitions — particularly of German art — were scarce, several galleries and museums had exhibited his art.¹¹⁵ This was predominantly due to the unwavering backing by his support network, most of them were connected to the group of German intellectual émigrés that had come to the U.S. in the first half of the century.

Three of his earliest supporters were Karl Nierendorf, Wilhelm R. Valentiner and J.B. Neumann. Nierendorf, who had taken over Neumann's gallery in Berlin, had emigrated himself to the U.S. in 1936 and had opened the Nierendorf Gallery. Valentiner, who had gotten to know Beckmann during the 1930s when he had worked in Berlin, later founded the journals *Art in America* and *Art Quarterly*, and worked at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Detroit Institute of Arts.¹¹⁶ J.B. Neumann had arrived in the U.S. in 1923, and immediately set out to promote German modern art in his New York gallery New Art Circle. He also provided a link to Alfred H. Barr, whom Neumann had given material and information for his classes. As

¹¹¹ "Beckmann ist kein Exilant im üblichen Sinn. Er versuchte nicht, wie Emigranten es normalerweise es tun, sich sprachlich und sozial anzupassen." Stefana Sabin, "Und bin damit gewissermaßen schon halber Amerikaner," in *Beckmann & Amerika*, ed. by Jutta Schütt, 57.

¹¹² F. Forster-Hahn, "Imagining the American West: Max Beckmann in St. Louis and California," in Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Makela (ed.) *Of 'Truths Impossible to Put in Words,'* 292.

¹¹³ "Mittwoch, 21. November, 1945," Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 131.

¹¹⁴ The first exhibition of Max Beckmann's art in the United States took place in 1913: "Exhibition of Contemporary German Graphic Art" at the Art Institute in Chicago.

¹¹⁵ The Buchholz Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, but also the Carnegie Institute, the Institute of Modern Art in Boston, the *Golden Gate International Exposition* in San Francisco, and others had exhibited the work of Max Beckmann throughout the war.

¹¹⁶ Wilhelm R. Valentiner was involved in early American exhibitions that had included Beckmann's works, such as *German Expressionism* at the Anderson Galleries, in New York, in 1923. Sorensen, Lee. "Wilhelm Reinhold Otto Valentiner." Dictionary of Art Historians (website) <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/valentinerw.htm> (accessed September 19, 2016).

Sybil Kantor noted about their relationship, “[Neumann] contributed to Barr’s early interest German avant-garde art at a time when the interest of most Americans had not advanced beyond the School of Paris. Neumann’s devotion to [...] Max Beckmann [...] ultimately had its influence on Barr.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, through Neumann and Barr, Beckmann had been significantly presented and promoted in the United States.

Another supporter stood out for his efforts to establish the artist: Curt Valentin. Back in Germany, Valentin previously led Karl Buchholz’s Berlin bookstore’s art department, and exhibited the art of those outlawed by the National Socialists. When he arrived in New York City in 1937, he opened the Buchholz Gallery where he would continue to sell those works deemed ‘degenerate.’¹¹⁸ He was largely responsible for helping Beckmann immigrate to the U.S., and assisted the artist with all living and working arrangements.¹¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, Curt Valentin played an instrumental part in Beckmann obtaining his teaching position at Washington University in St. Louis and at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York. On the day of their arrival, Curt Valentin had set out to organize a party to welcome the artist and his wife in America.¹²⁰ About a week later, Valentin ensured that Beckmann had the opportunity to attend and reunite with the architect Mies van der Rohe at an opening party held at the MoMA.¹²¹ There, Valentin used the opportunity to put Beckmann in contact with many of the important representatives of the New York art scene: Alfred H. Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art and at that point Director of Collections; the painter Werner Drewes; James Thrall Soby, who was also Trustee, advisor and Chairman at the MoMA; the highly influential first curator at the MoMA Dorothy Canning Miller; Aline B. Louchheim, a journalist who wrote many important reviews about Beckmann in *Art News*; Jane Sabersky, who worked in the Department

¹¹⁷ Sybil Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 93.

¹¹⁸ Karl Buchholz and Günter Francke, both art dealers, were authorized by the Nazi regime to purchase Beckmann’s artworks under the condition that they were neither sold nor exhibited in Germany. Some of the works were sold to other collectors, some ended up travelling across the Atlantic to Curt Valentin’s Gallery in New York. Göpel and Göpel, *Max Beckmann, Katalog der Gemälde I* (Bern: Kornfeld und Cie, 1976), 99.

¹¹⁹ Erhard Göpel, *Max Beckmann in seinen späten Jahren*, 22-23.

¹²⁰ Monday, Sept 8, 1947, Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 206.

¹²¹ Tuesday, Sept 16, 1947, *ibid.*, 209.

of Circulating Exhibitions at the MoMA,¹²² and several reporters working in the cultural sector.¹²³

Perry T. Rathbone, assistant to Wilhelm R. Valentiner and close friend to Curt Valentin, also proved himself to be a forceful advocate for the artist, as he organized the first retrospective exhibition of Max Beckmann's art in North America, held at the Saint Louis Art Museum in 1948.¹²⁴ Once in New York, Beckmann immediately reconnected with Georg Swarzenski, who had been the Director General at the Frankfurt art museum when the artist had taught at the institution's art academy. Swarzenski had also immigrated to the U.S. and became research assistant to Erwin Panofsky in Princeton until 1946, later teaching at several American universities. He wrote the introductory text for the St. Louis retrospective's catalogue. Georg's son, the art historian Hanns Swarzenski, forged close ties with Beckmann as well and provided a link for Beckmann to get to know and befriend Karl Zerbe and Horst W. Janson.

Like Beckmann, Karl Zerbe had been a member of the German avant-garde art who fell victim to Hitler's cultural policies. Zerbe immigrated to Boston in 1935 and was involved in the promotion and acquisition of "outlawed" German artworks by the Busch-Reisinger Museum and Institute of Modern Art in Boston.¹²⁵ Among these efforts was an exhibition of Beckmann's artworks he set up immediately following World War II in 1946.¹²⁶ By the time Beckmann came to the U.S., he had become the head of the Department of Painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was member of the Artist Equity Association. During his stay in St. Louis, Beckmann met the art historian Horst W. Janson, who was an Associate Professor and colleague of his at the Washington University. He was a key figure in the North American art historical field who had and continued to support Beckmann by collecting his art work.¹²⁷

¹²² Several visits are recorded by Beckmann, including his and Quappi's house-party in December of 1949. In May of 1950 Jane Sabersky was translating Beckmann's speech he prepared for his Honorary Doctorate to be bestowed by the Washington University in St. Louis. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 352 and 373.

¹²³ Max Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 207-210, and Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, 59.

¹²⁴ Annabelle Kienle, 55.

¹²⁵ Judith Arlene Bookbinder, *Boston Modern. Figurative Expressionism as Alternative Modernism* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), 4-5.

¹²⁶ "Zerbe left the organizing of the gallery at the Museum School to me," [Zerbe's student] Aaronson stated. "I went to New York and saw Curt Valentin to arrange the Beckmann show. He said, 'Take anything you want.' No one else was interested in the work." Judith A. Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 185.

¹²⁷ He was born in Russia, but grew up in Hamburg graduating from the Wilhelm Gymnasium, studied under Erwin Panofsky at the University in Hamburg, but was able to leave Germany in 1935 due to Alfred H. Barr's sponsorship. Janson then went to study at Harvard under Paul J. Sachs and Chandler R. Post.

<https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/jansonh.htm>

But Beckmann also met and received endorsements from Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the founders of the Metropolitan Museum, and Joseph Pulitzer Jr., a newspaper publisher. Morton D. May, a St. Louis art collector who was in charge of the May Department Store imperium, became one of Beckmann's biggest proponents. May almost immediately began to amass the largest North American Beckmann collection, which he later bequeathed to the Saint Louis Art Museum. After their encounter in St. Louis, May even commissioned the artist to paint his portrait.

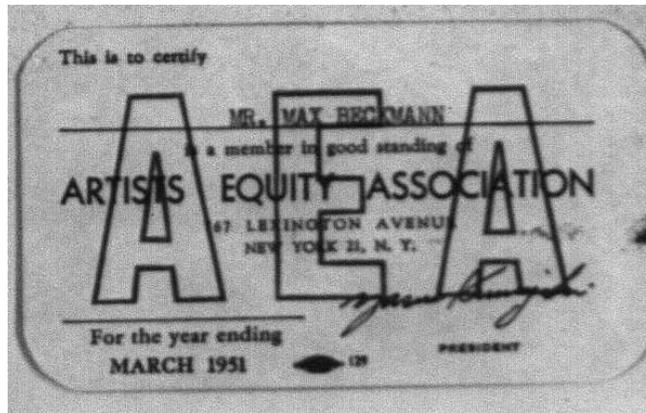


Figure 2. Max Beckmann, "Artist Equity Membership Card," *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1340:1240

Having moved back to New York City in 1949, Beckmann started building a circle of friends, remarkable in size and personage. Several diary entries by Beckmann attest to his friendships with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Jane Sabersky and Marion Greenwood.¹²⁸ His correspondence with Kuniyoshi reveals that he joined the Artist Equity Association in December of 1948, offering Beckmann not only economic support, but also the opportunity to connect with even more members of the vibrant New York art scene. His friendship with Marion Greenwood, a muralist who had just returned from Hong Kong and had earlier worked in Mexico with Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo, is most likely a connection he made because of his ties to Kuniyoshi and his membership with Artist Equity.¹²⁹ Beckmann had also befriended the artist Stuyvesant

¹²⁸ Marion Greenwood is also mentioned several times in Beckmann's diary, most notably when — shortly before his death on November 29, 1950 — he prepared sketches of her. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 398.

¹²⁹ Greenwood had several contacts in the left-wing circles and had contributed to *The New Masses* in 1934. Catherine MacKenzie, "Place Really Does Matter: Marion Greenwood's 1947 'China' Exhibition," *RACAR* XXV, 1-2 (1998): 59-62.

van Veen,¹³⁰ who lived in the same building as Beckmann on 241 East 19th Street. Van Veen had been a WPA muralist and had created, not without controversy,¹³¹ several social-realist murals for courthouses and other public buildings throughout the country.¹³² Furthermore, he had been instructor at the New York chapter of the John Reed Club School of Art,¹³³ had previously contributed illustrations to *The New Masses* (**Figure 3**) and *Nation* during the 1930s, all communist or left-leaning publications, and knew that his previous political activities made him “more undesirable than desirable.”¹³⁴ Due to Beckmann’s daily notes in his diary, one can trace his regular get-togethers, dinners, parties, and discussions during this time with Sabersky, Greenwood and van Veen.

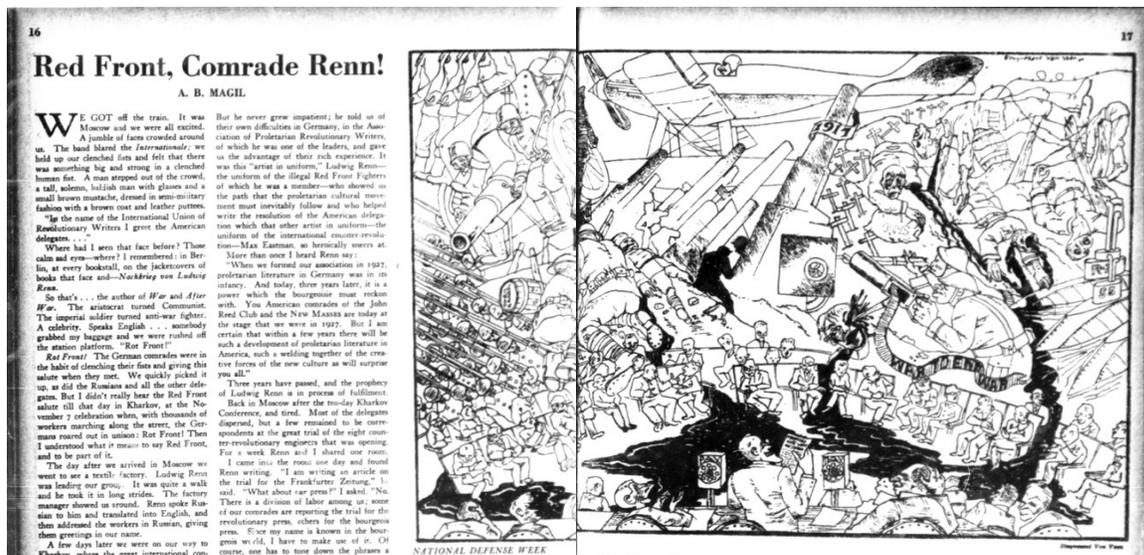


Figure 3. Stuyvesant van Veen Illustration in *The New Masses*, vol. X, no. 7 (February 13, 1934), 16-17.

¹³⁰ Van Veen helped Beckmann’s move to this new residence. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 372. In a sign of friendship, Beckmann gave van Veen’s one of his etchings. *Ibid.*, 396.

¹³¹ In 1937, van Veen was commissioned to do a mural for the Federal Courthouse and Post office in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh skyline that van Veen presented was innocuous only at first sight, yet hidden were the political, communist symbols, Hammer and Sickle. The symbolism was detected only after the mural’s installation. Sylvia Rhor, “Pittsburgh Panorama, 1937,” *Pittsburgh Art Places*, <http://www.pittsburghartplaces.org/accounts/view/1158>.

¹³² *Work Progress Administration*, a New Deal agency. He was also illustrator for *Nation* and *New Masses*. Archive of American Art, *Stuyvesant Van Veen Papers*, circa 1926-1988, Collection Summary.

¹³³ A 1932 ad in *The New Masses*, a Marxist magazine and associated with the Communist Party, USA, had promoted their program: “Bonus Marches! Strikes! Evictions! Starvation! Learn to depict these stirring events of American life today! Study under the guidance of these well-known artists – William Gropper – Hugo Gellert – Adolph Dehn – Eitaro Ishigaki – William Siegel – Stuyvesant van Veen – Anton Refregier – Philip Reisman and others.” *New Masses*, Nov 1932, vol. 08, no. 04, New Masses Archive, <https://archive.org/details/v01n05-sep-1926-New-Masses>.

¹³⁴ Stuyvesant Van Veen Papers, “Interview with Stuyvesant van Veen by Emily Nathan,” May 5 – 14, 1981, 9.

A support system as extensive as Beckmann's might lead one to believe that he could count on an easy transfer to the United States and would be able to integrate comfortably. The reality proved difficult for Beckmann, however: he was plagued with health and financial troubles and was worried about the political situation. On Tuesday, December 21, 1948 he writes in his diary: "My art-political and monetary measures remain dull. No mail from A., nothing from Valentin."¹³⁵ During the war, Beckmann had started "encrypting" his diary out of fear of surveillance or confiscation, careful not to release any unequivocal information, and had formed a habit to not release full names of his friends and associates.¹³⁶ It is not unusual to see codenames, or, as in the present case, single letter abbreviations. One can only speculate whether this entry refers to his supporters Alfred H. Barr Jr. and Curt Valentin.

In several diary entries Beckmann describes how he met his new acquaintances and discussed timely matters. On Thursday, May 13, 1948 for example, Beckmann and his wife had dinner with another Washington University colleague: "At Jacovelli, where we dined [...] Later, at Zunia's two Whiskeys and discussions about art and nation."¹³⁷ Zunia and Jules Henry were friends of the Beckmann's from St. Louis where Jules Henry was Professor of Sociology and colleague at Washington University. Beckmann certainly would have had much to contribute to the discussion about art and nation, yet one only needs to read the preface to Henry's 1963 *Culture Against Man* to know that he too was deeply interested in the topic and the cultural-political developments shaping up in the United States in the decade after World War II, something he referred to as "random social and political lunacy."¹³⁸ On Friday, May 12th, 1950,

¹³⁵ Dienstag, 21. Dezember 1948: „Meine kunst- und geldpolitischen Dinge hingegen sehen weiter trübe aus. Keine Post von A., nichts von Valentin. Sehe mich schon mit hängender Nase auf dem Rückweg von NY.“ Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 292.

¹³⁶ Beckmann burnt his diaries upon the German invasion of Holland, destroying his diaries from 1925 to 1940.

¹³⁷ "Sahen Conway Wachsfarben demonstrieren in Television bei Jacovelli wo wir dinierten. Später noch bei Zunia zwei Whiskey's und Gespräche über Kunst und Volk." Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 253. Donnerstag, 13. Mai 1948. Also: Political discussions with Henrys and Harrison on February 12, 1948: Göpel and Beckmann, *Max Beckmann*, 237.

¹³⁸ "I want to thank Washington University for [...] its bracing climate of academic freedom, where one can teach what ideas one pleases, and finds students alert, and intelligent enough to listen and 'fight back.' Second, for its composure in the presence of the waves of political and social prejudice that have swept over this country. In its acceptance of academic freedom as the very breath of the University, and in its composure in the presence of random social and political lunacy, Washington University is a perfect expression of the intellectual life in a democracy." Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963), viii.

Beckmann meets up with Stuyvesant van Veen and Harold Weston. They have whiskey and conversations about “past and future disasters.”¹³⁹

Beckmann frequently commented on the political situation, particularly the impending Korean conflict and threat of an atomic war, which seems to have frightened him very much. On April 11, 1948, he wrote: “This Sunday too, passed with much unnecessary clamor. – [...] I spent the entire afternoon reading the newspaper and found the political situation quite unpleasant.”¹⁴⁰ The next day he makes note of the “war-like mood everywhere.” The thin line between existential worries Beckmann was plagued with and simultaneous opportunities and prospective success he was presented with, is revealed in the following January 1948 note from his diary:

Departure from Chicago at 10:30 am. Boring drive back without any incidents, when arriving home, we found to our pleasant surprise the threat of deportation and denial of our visa from the Palais de Justice in New York – otherwise, nothing. [...] At night a tumultuous museum party with champagne, Beckmann-excitement from the museum president and chancellor (from the Washington University) and many other people.¹⁴¹

Hearing about Beckmann’s immigration troubles, Hudson D. Walker, executive director at Artist Equity Association, had subsequently visited Beckmann with Harold M. Weston to provide legal advice and helped him sort out the necessary steps and hurdles to obtain the visa to stay in the United States.¹⁴² Later in 1949,¹⁴³ Artist Equity supported Beckmann again when he had problems with his landlady and tried to get out of his lease. But it was not just housing and visa issues that troubled the artist: the promotion of his art in North America faced several obstacles. A closer look at the exhibitions in which Beckmann’s work was featured reveals complex underlying notions that complicated the artist’s establishment in the North American art pantheon.

¹³⁹ Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 373.

¹⁴⁰ Sonntag, 11. April 1948: „Auch dieser Sonntag ging vorbei mit vielem unnötigen Geschrei. – [...]ganzen Nachmittag Zeitung gelesen und die politische Situation recht unangenehm empfunden.“ Montag, 12. April 1948: „Überall beginnende Kriegsstimmung – noch in trostlos stumpfsinniger Nacht downtown.“ Ibid., 260.

¹⁴¹ „Abfahrt aus Chicago um halb elf. Langweilige Fahrt zurück ohne jedes Ereignis, und fanden zu Haus zur freudigen Überraschung – Deportations-Drohung und Visa-Verweigerung vom Palais de Justice New York – und sonst nothing [...] Abends dann noch im Tumult einer Museumsparty mit Champagne, Beckmannbegeisterung vom Museum’s Präsident bis zum Chancellor (Washington-University) – und viele andere Menschen – so das man müde und ziemlich verwirrt gut geschlafen hat.“ Montag, 19. Januar, 1948. St. Louis, Ibid., 233.

¹⁴² Ibid., 243.

¹⁴³ “Legal correspondence from Harold M. Weston to Mrs. Castagna,” June 1, 1950, *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1341:0751.

Transcending the Canon: North American Reception of Max Beckmann's Art

Despite the support by his network and Artist Equity, sales of Beckmann's art were scarce.¹⁴⁴ This was not due to a lack of opportunities to have his work shown — in fact, Beckmann's art was featured in over one hundred group exhibitions and twenty solo exhibitions¹⁴⁵ — but the economic situation and the complex standing of German modernist art. Here I shall give consideration to those factors that affected the popularity of Beckmann's art in its North American setting: his nationality, his depiction of violence, his perspicuous style, and the growing influence of politics in the cultural sphere.

Certainly, the reception and acceptance of German modernist art was highly affected by the political turmoil the nation had caused throughout the world. Adding to this, Alfred Barr's influential exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* of 1936,¹⁴⁶ for which he had drawn his well-known genealogical tree (**Figure 4**) of modern art, had omitted the figurative abstractions of the Weimar Republic. In a welcome article that considers the place of German painting in the post-war era, Andreas Huyssen succinctly describes the obstacles for German art created by Barr's omission:

20th century German art has often been seen as an anomaly within modernism. Neither expressionism, nor Dada, nor Weimar's *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) played a significant role in Alfred Barr's powerful and influential coding of the 20th century visual arts in New York's Museum of Modern Art. The German special path (*Sonderweg*) in the arts was explained, if not dismissed, with clichés about subjective expression, irrationalist frenzy, and dark romanticism, all of it presumably typical of German national character and left behind by the triumph of classical modernism.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Beckmann was plagued with monetary worries, and on several occasions had to ask Curt Valentin for financial assistance. In a letter from February 16, 1948, Beckmann writes about his immigration troubles. Because he was legally not allowed to work on a visitor's visa, he was told that he had to leave the country and request re-entry on a Non-Quota Visa. To finance this trip, he asked Valentin to keep ready \$5 – 800, depending on still pending art sales. "Brief an Valentin von Beckmann. 16.2.48." Klaus Gallwitz, et al., ed. *Max Beckmann. Briefe III.*, 201.

¹⁴⁵ Annabelle Kienle, 61.

¹⁴⁶ Original diagram sketch "Cubism and Abstract Art" by Alfred Barr, *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:1365.

¹⁴⁷ Andreas Huyssen, "German Painting in the Cold War," *New German Critique* 110, vol. 37:2 (2010): 210.

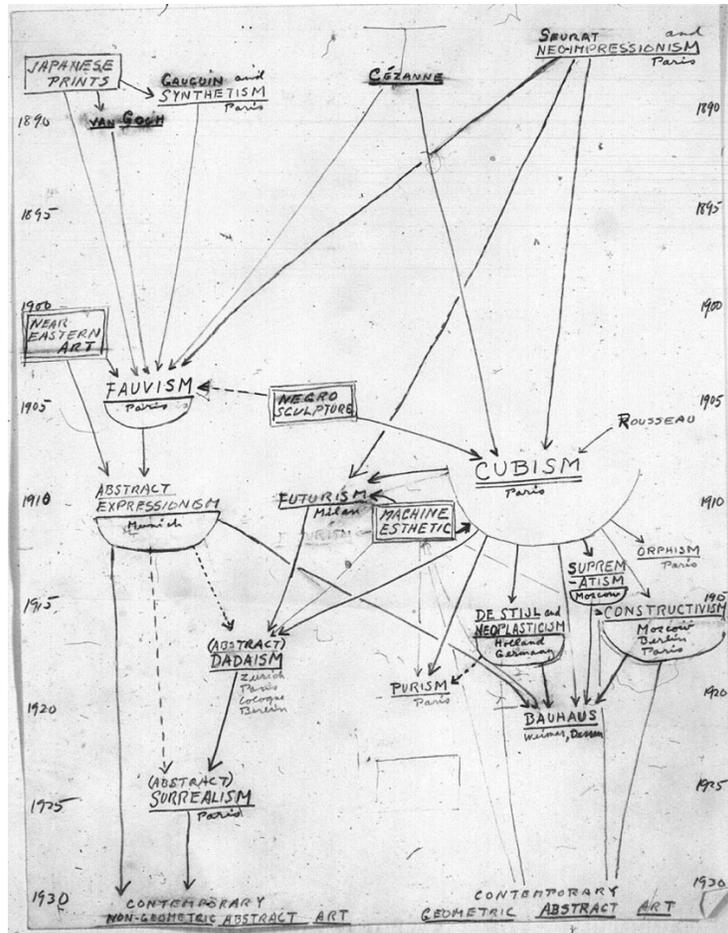


Figure 4. Original diagram sketch “Cubism and Abstract Art” by Alfred Barr, Alfred H. Barr Papers, reel 3263:1365.

Max Beckmann had been part of the group of thirty-two artists featured in the exhibition “Neue Sachlichkeit” organized by Gustav Hartlaub in 1925 in Mannheim (*Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus*). Alfred Barr was well aware of the influential exhibition as Hartlaub had written to him a letter about the meaning of this expression.¹⁴⁸ Barr’s omission of the German developments in his proposed canon reflects and furthered the American audiences’ favoring of the French over German modernist artworks in the avant-garde’s reception during this time. James Plaut, director at the Boston Institute of Modern Art in 1939, even felt the need to caution the visitors of the exhibition *Contemporary German Art*: “[f]or the American observer, contemporary German art has none of the gayety, charm, and technical brilliance

¹⁴⁸ Fritz Schmalenbach, “The Term Neue Sachlichkeit,” *The Art Bulletin* 22/3 (Sep., 1940): 161-165.

readily associated with the spectacular school of Paris or the best of our own Americans. It seems almost overburdened in its sociological implications and guided by repression or adversity.”¹⁴⁹

Notwithstanding these hurdles, ever since the Nazi-regime began unleashing its vile denouncement of “subversive” artists, the persecuted artist began to benefit from the strong negative sentiments felt by North American audiences towards totalitarian regimes. Exhibitions such as “*Unpopular*” Art at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1940, the 1946 *Forbidden Art in the Third Reich* organized by the Karl Nierendorf Gallery in New York, and *Displaced Paintings, Refugees from Nazi Germany* in 1948 at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, all featuring Beckmann’s work, are emblematic of this development. In essence, the contextualization of the persecuted art and artists who fell victims to the National-Socialist enemies allowed for the curators to present otherwise unacceptable German art to North American audiences. As Sabine Eckmann eloquently states, “German modernism in the United States was re-evaluated not because of its aesthetic value but because of its politicization by the German dictatorship.”¹⁵⁰

During and in the years following World War II, the rescued works of art became symbols of German resistance and the artists were thought of as German dissidents, gaining them sympathy from domestic audiences. The fact that Beckmann had left the Third Reich on his own accord sufficed to make him an artist-prototype of integrity and incorruptibility.¹⁵¹ In a review for his first American retrospective held in 1948 at the City Art Museum in St. Louis, one local newspaper stated: “The threat of complete suppression [by the Nazis] forced Beckmann to flee to Holland in 1937 [...] Unlike the First World War, which had seemed so cataclysmic to him that he had to stop painting, Beckmann met the Nazi challenge head on and continued to paint more provocative pictures than ever.”¹⁵² The idea that the artist was actively provoking the National Socialists certainly helped Beckmann’s art to be promoted by his supporters in the war and post-war years, as Beckmann himself had not made any clear political statements since his speech in London of 1938. Positioning Beckmann as dissident of the German regime, however, meant re-enforcing his German nationality and his past political activities. This was at times a precarious

¹⁴⁹ Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koenick, *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 106.

¹⁵⁰ Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koenick, *Caught by Politics*, 106.

¹⁵¹ Stefana Sabin, “Und bin damit gewissermassen schon halber Amerikaner” in *Beckmann & Amerika*, ed. by Jutta Schuett, 53.

¹⁵² “Work of Noted German Artist Displayed In C.U. Art Gallery,” Clipping from *Boulder Camera*, June 27, 1949, *Max Beckmann Papers*, Correspondence, reel 1341:0149.

undertaking, as the reputation of that nation was extremely poor. Additionally, Beckmann was an immigrant, rather than a true exile in the U.S. and seemed to be uneasy with the association of his predicaments and political activities of the past. In a letter to his ex-wife Minna, Beckmann urges her not to send anything political, as he had “to restrain” himself “in all matters. Besides,” he said, “I am not at all in a position to do anything.”¹⁵³ On Wednesday, August 10, 1949, he noted in his diary: “The ghosts of my old images, that are long gone, still spook the newspapers.”¹⁵⁴

Even though being the target of Hitler’s wrath had gained him sympathies, Beckmann’s North American arrival coincided with the time period when audiences largely favored French modernism and still grappled with the acceptance of the socially critical avant-garde art forms. Another letter to Minna Beckmann-Tube attests to the fact that Beckmann knew about the French modernists’ dominance and Alfred Barr enormous influence in the art world, when he wrote about the difficulties to gain success in America: “The French Modern still stand as steep walls, but one cannot deny that due to the tenacious work of Valentin and maybe my not so untalented painting, not entirely irrelevant holes have perforated the fortress.”¹⁵⁵ The Museum of Modern Art had purchased Beckmann’s triptych *Departure* in 1942 and Barr had discussed it in his book *What is Modern Painting?*, published in 1943.¹⁵⁶ Beckmann was proud that MoMA had

¹⁵³ “Brief an Minna Beckmann-Tube, 24. Januar 1949,” Klaus Gallwitz, et al., ed. *Max Beckmann. Briefe*, Vol. III, 241.

¹⁵⁴ “Die Gespenster meiner alten Bilder, die längst nicht mehr vorhanden sind, durchgeistern noch immer die Zeitungen. Fast wie ich selber, dessen Tagestraum sich langsam immer mehr auflöst und zu einem resignierten – auf Deuwel komm raus mit herabgezogenen Mundwinkel – sich mühsam fortwurstelndem Lebenstanz wurde. – Sah heute in einem Schaufensterspiegel mein eignes Abbild – oh my – und unerhörter Ekel durchflutete mein Herz.” Mittwoch, 10. August 1949, Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 343.

¹⁵⁵ “Noch stehen die modernen Franzosen wie steile Mauern aber es lässt sich nicht leugnen, dass der zähen Arbeit von Valentin und meiner vielleicht nicht ganz unbegabten Malerei es doch gelungen ist, nicht ganz unerhebliche Breschungen in diese Festung zu schlagen. – Aber der Kampf ist verflucht schwer. Großes Kapital und langjährige überforcierte Propaganda machen die Stellung dieser Leute ziemlich uneinnehmbar und es ist schon viel, dass ich (geschäftlich) anfangs neben ihnen zu bestehen.” Max Beckmann, Brief an Minna Beckmann-Tube, 18. September 1948, Rudolf Pillep, *Die Realität der Träume in den Bildern*, 188.

“Schön, dass scheinbar ein paar Menschen sich für meine “geringe Malerei” (wie die Chinesen sagen) zu interessieren scheinen - jedoch mit Trauer im Herzen kann ich nur über geringe Ankäufe melden - so dass schäbige Geldsorgen weiter die Schwingen des ‚Genius‘ lähmen.“ Brief an Hanns Swarzensky: St. Louis, 16 Januar 1949, in Rudolf Pillep, *Die Realität der Träume in den Bildern* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1984), 189.

¹⁵⁶ In the section titled “Expressionism: The religious Spirit,” *Departure* was placed alongside a 1930s work by the French Catholic painter George Rouault (*Christ Mocked by Soldiers*). Barr states that “the crucial problems of our civilization” are “war, the character of democracy and fascism, the effects of industrialization, the exploration of the subconscious mind, the revival of religion, the liberty and restraint of the individual. [...] the work of art is a symbol, a visible symbol of the human spirit in its search for truth, freedom and perfection.” Barr’s juxtaposition of Beckmann’s work with that by Rouault suggests French modernism’s prevalence, while Barr’s statements allude to the pervasive universalism at this time. Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 35.

purchased his work and he visited the museum as soon as he arrived in New York City in 1947.¹⁵⁷

Alfred Barr had great interest in the religious iconography of modern art, in part due to his father being a Presbyterian minister and he himself being an elder of the same church. Barr was influential in shaping Beckmann's reception in the United States by trying to position him in the orbit of religious modernism rather than a direct politicized frame of reference. But despite Barr's efforts to position the artist within the sphere of existential modernism and outside of politics, Beckmann's explicit use of violence and dark subject matter was not well received in the United States: already in 1946, *TIME Magazine* had written disapprovingly about the exhibition *Modern Religious Paintings*, one "unlikely to win any converts to religion – or to modern art, either." About Beckmann specifically, note was taken of his "grim, ghastly *Descent from the Cross* — an expressionistic night mare [sic] which might have been influenced by the 3rd-Century belief that Christ was the ugliest of men (because He bore the sins of the world in His body)."¹⁵⁸ In 1948, Aline Louchheim wrote for the *New York Times* about the Beckmann's art as being "raw and immediate:"

Nothing is predigested to conform to our accustomed aspect of the world... All his means — distortion, disparate scale, crowding of figures to the surface, slashing black lines, resonant color — are toward the expression of untamed sensation, emotion and idea. Only occasionally are they overstated with a kind of Teutonic heavy-handedness.¹⁵⁹

Beckmann, an avid reader of the newspaper, was well aware of the negative receptions he was receiving.¹⁶⁰ In a letter he sent to Hanna-Elisabeth Saekel in 1949 he wrote: "... too many times I hear clamor about the ugliness and repulsiveness of my paintings, which always saddens me."¹⁶¹ A statement written in his diary on Wednesday October 14, 1948 sums up the disenchantment Beckmann felt in terms of his ambivalent reception and his exasperation with a conformist approach: "Much Glory, reproductions in *Art News* ('Actors', Carnegie, 'Siesta') etc. etc. but –

¹⁵⁷ Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 208.

¹⁵⁸ "Too Hot to Handle," *TIME Magazine*, January 14, 1946, 47: 2, 59.

¹⁵⁹ Aline B. Louchheim, "Beckmann Paints the Inner Reality," *New York Times*, June 13, 1948, X6.

¹⁶⁰ "Na jedenfalls haben sich die braven "Hasenohren" in lebhaftes Wackeln versetzt und Pressestunk ist groß. Jury-Abbildungen, Verleumdungen, alles durcheinander." Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 225: Sonntag, 7. Dezember 1947.

¹⁶¹ „Zu oft höre ich noch immer Geschrei über das Hässliche und Abstoßende meiner Bilder, was mich immer wieder traurig stimmt. Gerade, dass Sie einmal (scheint's fast restlos) gesehen haben, dass meine Bilder schön sein wollen trotz allen, war mir eine angenehme Überraschung (Schön und Schrecklich wie das Leben.)“ Brief an Hanna-Elisabeth Saekel, Boulder 17. Juli 1949, in Rudolf Pillep, *Die Realität der Träume in den Bildern*, 194.

no money and still no large collectors – and it won't happen. I am too heavy. – the danger right now is to sink into a bourgeois monotony – within me – and from the outside as well. – Resignation about the ignorance of the world?!”¹⁶² For the retrospective exhibition in St. Louis, Perry T. Rathbone had consulted Beckmann several times before publishing a text which seemed to redress the “accusations” made in previous exhibition reviews:¹⁶³

Beckmann knows all about the problems that have confronted art since the dissolution of materialism and naturalism. But for him they are never merely aesthetical problems of form. His image of man may seem abstract by the intensity of its sheer physical reality; but actually, it is not abstracted, not torn from reality; it is only abstract in the sense of the symbol that for the artist has been made to contain everything in itself and out of which must come all communication. He is no escapist. His painting is always full of physical reality and never eliminates the human element. [...] He creates an iconography of his own. Even when he endeavors to ‘illustrate’ such visionary Biblical poetry as the apocalypse, the text becomes almost the symbolic expression of his own vision.¹⁶⁴

In the Cold War era, art was increasingly employed to juxtapose the cultural politics of the totalitarian regimes with those of democratic societies that welcomed and encouraged outlawed artists. An article of 1950 in *The New York Times* reflects this notion:

Taken together the galleries of the two floors form an excellent presentation of highlights in the modern movement [...] There is an excellent selection of modern German painting executed before the heavy hand of the Nazi regime fell upon it as the fist of official communism in the Soviet Union fell upon modernism since then [...] four canvases by Max Beckmann which clearly delineate his growth from 1920 to the present. The earliest is the ‘Family group’ of 1920 [...] the deepening vein is shown in the ‘Departure triptych of the middle nineteen thirties. And the latest is the rich ‘Still life with Candles,’ [Figure 5] a product of his recent happier years in this country.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² 14. Oktober 1948: “Gloire [sic] ganz viel, Reproduktion in Art News (“Schauspielerinnen”, Carnegie, “Siesta”) etc. etc. aber – kein Geld und immer noch keine großen Sammler – wird auch nicht kommen. Bin zu schwer. – Die Gefahr zur Zeit ist, in ein bürgerliches Gleichmaß zu versinken – in mir selbst – und auch von außen. – Resignation über die Unverständlichkeit der Welt?!” Donnerstag, Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 280.

¹⁶³ On April 25, 1948, he mentions Perry “investigating” him for the text of the catalogue. Göpel and Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 250.

¹⁶⁴ Hanns Swarzenski, Perry T. Rathbone and Hannah B. Muller, “Max Beckmann 1948”, *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis*, Vol. 33, No. 1-2, (May, 1948), 1-114.

¹⁶⁵ Howard Devree, “Modern Cross Section,” *New York Times*, Sep 3, 1950, 48.



Figure 5. Max Beckmann, *Departure*, 1932-1935, oil on canvas, three panels, The Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 6. Max Beckmann, *Still-Life with Two Large Candles*, 1947, oil on canvas, Saint Louis Art Museum.

The *Departure* triptych had also been included in the ground-breaking 1937 exhibition *Art in Our Time* at the MoMA.¹⁶⁶ In the catalogue for that exhibition Barr had already slid the painting into a political context: “*Departure* refers symbolically to his exile, caused by disapproval of his art.”¹⁶⁷ This political context could now be applied to set a correlation between the two totalitarian regimes, Nazism and Communism, and play into the fear induced by the bipolar power structures during the Cold War. Harboring and accepting persecuted artists, the United States could position itself as a democratic haven for all victims of dictatorship, a notion of increasing significance during this time.

Universal American Art

Max Beckmann was soon subsumed by many as an American artist.¹⁶⁸ The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh had introduced the artist during the thirties in their survey-style international exhibitions as a representative of Germany,¹⁶⁹ then included Beckmann’s work in 1948, 1949, and 1950 for their annual show *Painting in the United States*, restricted to American artists only.¹⁷⁰ In 1949, Beckmann was even awarded First Prize for his painting *Fisherwomen*.¹⁷¹ This

¹⁶⁶ Valentin had asked Max Beckmann about the meaning of the work to which Beckmann replied in a letter: “take the picture away or send it back to me dear Valentin. If people cannot understand it of their own accord, of their own inner “creative sympathy”, there is no sense in showing it. To me the picture is a sort of rosary, or a circle of colorless figures which sometimes, when the current is turned on, can take on a glorious brilliance. The picture speaks to me of truths impossible for me to put in words, truths of which I did not even know before. It can only speak to people who consciously or unconsciously already carry within them a similar metaphysical code. *Departure*, yes *Departure*, from the illusions of life toward the essential realities that lie hidden beyond. But this after all applies to all my pictures. It should be said that *Departure* bears no tendencious [sic] meaning – it could be applied to all times.” Beckmann on *Departure*, letter to Valentin, March 11, 1938, *Alfred H. Barr papers*, reel 3149:1105.

¹⁶⁷ Peter Howard Selz, Harold Joachim, Perry T. Rathbone, and Max Beckmann. *Max Beckmann* (Gardencity: Dobleday, 1964), 120.

¹⁶⁸ At that point Beckmann was only “half-American”, as he wrote to Minna in April 1950, since he still had to wait another three years after having applied for citizenship in 1948 (the process takes five years to complete). Sabine Rewald, *Max Beckmann in New York*, 39.

¹⁶⁹ In 1949, the *Somerset Daily American* describes the longstanding involvement between the institution and the artist as follows: “Max Beckmann, who was awarded first prize for his canvas ‘Fisherwoman’, had previously received an award in the *Carnegie Institute* in the German Section of the 1929 International. [His painting] ‘The Loge’, was given an honorable mention. He exhibited also in the 1931, 1934, 1936, 1938, and 1939 Internationals and last year in ‘Painting in the United States, 1948’, with the canvas ‘Siesta.’” In “Beckmann Gets \$1,500 For Painting,” *Somerset Daily American*, October 15, 1949, 3.

¹⁷⁰ “It is a powerful picture in the style of the German expressionists, of whom Mr. Beckmann is a leading exponent. Other of this artist paintings had the indubitable honor of being called “degenerate art” by Germany’s worst art critic: Adolph Hitler. [...] This exhibition aims at a comprehensive view of all the various trends on American painting.”

development is on one hand indicative of the difficulty of clearly placing the artist and on the other exemplary for the accepting nature of North American democracy. Beckmann's prior German citizenship was well known, of course, so the lack of opposition in the press or in exhibition reviews to his integration within the American art community and participation in these American-only events, points toward the strength of the latter "instinct."

One of Beckmann's major accomplishments during this time was the large retrospective exhibition at the City Art Museum in St. Louis organized by Wilhelm R. Valentiner in 1948. Beckmann also took part in the *Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture* by the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts in 1949, and he was included in the annual *Contemporary American Painting* at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1950, an institution known to promote domestic art.¹⁷² The same year, he was also part of the exhibition *American Painters of Today* at the Yale University Art Gallery. In the immediate post-war period, Max Beckmann was therefore simultaneously considered for his German nationality — if his persecution or exile status could be referenced — and as representative of the American art scene, omitting his nationality but stressing his expression of timeless ideas and his acceptance into an open society.

Discussions surrounding the question of whether the immigrated European artists should and could be considered to be representatives of American art were discussed in the press.¹⁷³ Highlighting the timeless and universal qualities expressed in modernist art was one way to overcome this quandary and is illustrated in the following article in the *New York Times*:

Nationalism in art constitutes a problem weighted with peril, not to say loaded with dynamite [...] the presence of so-called 'popular' art (which 'can be properly described as American just as its counterparts elsewhere' reveal attributes of other schools) and again calling attention to the fundamental 'language' of modern art as contrasted with the 'old languages' basically distinguishing works of previous epochs. The fact that much of the art of our own time speaks in terms of certain general, widely employed idioms need not prevent its being 'native' in flavor. Art that is 'universal'.

"Carnegie Prize Show Opens," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 16, 1949, 6M. See also: Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, 61.

¹⁷¹ "T'ja also, man hat ihn: First Prize of the Carnegie! (1500D.) Brief von H.S. Gaudens mit allen Chikanen. Ich hatte es nicht geglaubt, daß so etwas noch möglich ist in dieser Konkurrenzwelt – na – naja." Donnerstag, 13. Oktober 1949, Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 355.

¹⁷² Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, 61.

¹⁷³ Edward Alden Jewell, "When is Art American? At the Brooklyn Museum Art School," *New York Times*, Sep 2, 1946, 46.

Max Beckmann's art lent itself well to a highlighting of universal themes, and North American curators and supporters often deployed this strategy to circumvent the difficulties of positioning the painter. Furthermore, such reading legitimized the ambiguousness of Beckmann's private iconography — which he encouraged the viewers to discover for themselves — and vindicated the absence of the progressive expressionist art of the Weimar Republic in Barr's proposed art historical canon. Ralph M. Pearson applies this approach when he drafted his chapter on the artist in his art historical survey *The Modern Renaissance in American Art*:

As a German Expressionist who won the honor of being branded by Hitler as a 'degenerate,' Beckmann escaped to Holland in 1937 and worked there through the occupation and until his migration to this country in 1947. The fact that his modernism is international, that it paralleled the developments of Paris is highly significant. It demonstrates the universality of the modern 'expressionism.'¹⁷⁴

Here Beckmann is positioned not only as victim of the Nazi regime and as being on par with the French counterpart, but also as an artist motivated by universal concerns. The universalist characterization and interpretation of Beckmann's art was a way for curators to circumvent attacks made by conservative representatives in the cultural and political sphere. The invasion of "this horde of art saboteurs," as Dondero had charged, surely would have included Max Beckmann as well.¹⁷⁵ But, it was also an overall repulse and reaction to the nationalism demanded by the totalitarian regimes. The National Socialists, for example, had tried to promote a German spirit, which "must never again be misused to open the door to insidious foreign influences."¹⁷⁶

In the Cold War dichotomy between the totalitarian regimes' use of politicized art and the western world's free democratic expressions, the apolitical Abstract Expressionists would eventually be favored in the quest for a national American style able to express the notion of universalism and the benefits of democracy. As Sabine Eckmann discussed in *Caught by Politics* it was the "triangular constellation between exile, modern art, and national identity that fashioned

¹⁷⁴ Ralph M. Pearson, draft for his 1954 book "*The Modern Renaissance in American Art*" was sent to Beckmann for approval in 1949, at that point still titled "The American Renaissance in Painting." Correspondence 1940-1950, *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1341:0662-0664.

¹⁷⁵ "Congressional Record – House," March 17, 1952, p. 2459. *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0351.

¹⁷⁶ A 1933 speech by the Head of the Württemberg Kampfbund in pamphlet "Kulturprogramm im neuen Reich," cited in Barr's speech "Art Under Dictatorships: 1946," held in 1951 at Brown University/Chicago/Palm Beach, in *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3262:0728.

German and American art historical narratives.”¹⁷⁷ Beckmann was a German exile artist, but his political past and his figurative abstract style precluded him from fitting into the emerging narrative stressing freedom of expression epitomized in abstract, apolitical art.

Promoters of this narrative, such as the art critic Clement Greenberg, worked towards the universalist concept of abstract modern art, at the same time as they contributed to the negative attitude towards figurative expressions.¹⁷⁸ According to the theory proposed in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, Greenberg’s very influential essay published in 1939 in the leftist magazine *Partisan Review*, kitsch was the “culture of the masses”¹⁷⁹ and capable of being utilized for political ends. In contrast, the avant-garde had “succeeded in ‘detaching’ itself from society” and had turned into “art for art’s sake.” Abstract and autonomous art was most suitable to comply with the avant-garde’s avoidance of subject matter and political content and thus promoted by Greenberg.

Beckmann’s critical expressions of the socio-political environment of the Weimar Republic were consequently not favored by Clement Greenberg. In 1946, he called Beckmann’s triptych *Departure* “clumsy and callow,” albeit conceding that Beckmann “is certainly one of the last to handle the human figure and the portrait on the level of ambitious, original art [...] in spite of [his] inability to think it through consciously.”¹⁸⁰ Greenberg acknowledges Beckmann to be a great artist, but not a great painter. In 1948, when Beckmann lived in the United States, Greenberg reinforces this notion in his essay “The Decline of Cubism,” when stating that Beckmann, in his opinion “should paint better today than he does.”¹⁸¹ Except for purposes of juxtaposition and positioning Beckmann in opposition to the new, abstracting trends in American art,¹⁸² Greenberg did not comment again on the artist until shortly after his death in 1951, when he contrasts the work of Renoir to that of Beckmann, claiming that “the intensity of their feelings

¹⁷⁷ Sabine Eckmann, *Caught by Politics*, 97.

¹⁷⁸ Michael J. Lewis, “Art, Politics & Clement Greenberg,” *Commentary* 105:6 (1998), 59. Curiously, Max Beckmann addressed in his diary on Nov 15, 1950 the Brooklyn Museum Art School’s closing “Mit American Art School ist’s aus – na vielleicht auch ganz gut, wurde ein bisschen viel Kitsch in meinen Augen.” This comment may hint at the fact that he was familiar with Greenberg’s theories. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 396.

¹⁷⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1939, reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971) 3-21.

¹⁸⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Max Beckmann and Robert de Niro,” *The Nation*, 18 May 1946, reprinted in Clement Greenberg and John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. II: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 80.

¹⁸¹ Clement Greenberg, “The Decline of Cubism,” *Partisan Review*, no.3 (1948): 369, reprinted in Clement Greenberg and John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. II: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, 212.

¹⁸² Clement Greenberg, “Review of the Whitney Annual,” *The Nation*, 11 December 1948, reprinted in Clement Greenberg and John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. II: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, 266.

evokes a response that, while with a value of its own, is not quite fully an aesthetic one [...] They are not great painting [sic], whatever else they may be, and one is left with a feeling of a lack.”¹⁸³

In light of the shifting attitudes towards modern art, it is not surprising that Beckmann’s dissident political comments of the Weimar era¹⁸⁴— unless directed toward Nazism — were all but ignored and avoided in North American literature and criticism during this time. Where the beholder had searched for a political demarcation and messages repudiating the Nazi’s reign of terror, the paintings that he produced after the war were either seen as a continuation of his hermetic iconography or as emblemizing his overcoming of his various past obstacles. His works were therefore subjected to a simultaneous re- and de-politicization, but were never considered as a direct engagement of the artist with his immediate cultural environment. On Saturday, December 11, 1948, Beckmann seems to lament this deficiency in his diary: “Suddenly one realizes ‘to one’s own astonishment’ that the fight is over and one is shelved as an acknowledged champion – hm – a new version of a fight – that’s all – don’t change – completion is the goal.”¹⁸⁵ And on May 11, 1949 he defiantly and probably sarcastically stated: “From now on I will paint abstract, that is more pleasant.”¹⁸⁶

From Hermit to Advocate: Beckmann’s Return to Open Commentary

The overall atmosphere in the immediate post-war years in the United States was tense. Any communist association could lead to incrimination, and in several cases to trial. In fact, the year of Beckmann’s arrival in the United States marked the beginning of several high-profile legal proceedings targeting communist subversion and infiltration of American society. The American government was led to believe that the Soviets, the other super power that had emerged from World War II, would try to infiltrate American democracy with Communism and expand their sway into the western hemisphere. The goal to subdue the feared subversion led to malicious

¹⁸³ Clement Greenberg, “Chaim Soutine,” *Partisan Review*, January-February 1951; A&C (substantially changed), reprinted in Clement Greenberg and John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. III: Arrogant Purpose*, 76.

¹⁸⁴ His commentary on the murder of Rosa Luxemburg in his lithograph series *Hell (Die Hölle)* of 1919, for example.

¹⁸⁵ Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 302.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

campaigns against communist activities.¹⁸⁷ The infamous accusations against people with connections to the Hollywood movie industry for their alleged “red” influences were vehemently denounced in 1947, but those accused were blacklisted and convicted nonetheless. The Alger Hiss trials took place in 1948 and the Smith Act trials commenced in 1949. Alger Hiss, was a former American government official who was accused of espionage for the Soviets. Whittaker Chambers, a former U.S. Communist party member, had testified under subpoena that Hiss had been covertly a Communist, though not a spy. Hiss categorically denied the claims but was eventually convicted in 1950.¹⁸⁸ The case was a very contentious moment in the North American Cold War era and in turn foreshadowed the Smith Act trials of several Communist Party leaders, active in everything from publishing to union activities, that took place at Foley Square in New York in 1949: the Smith Act trials rang in an era where pure association could lead to prosecution and accusations of conspiring “to organize as the Communist Party.”¹⁸⁹ Most defendants of the Smith Act trials were convicted, notwithstanding controversial reactions and large number of protesters who picketed the proceedings.¹⁹⁰ Later, in 1950, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested, convicted and eventually sentenced to death for spying on behalf of the Soviet Union. The high-profile trial mobilized many left-leaning artists and intellectuals in the United States and around the world, who unsuccessfully fought for the liberation of the couple, or averting the inhumane use of the death penalty.¹⁹¹

Beckmann knew about the prevailing North American phobia of communist infiltration and spies. He had mentioned in a letter to Minna Beckmann-Tube that new regulations and a rising fear of espionage presented the greatest difficulties to “half-Americans” like him and he therefore saw no other option but to cancel his anticipated trip to Europe the coming summer.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Erik Bruce, “Dangerous World, Dangerous Liberties: Aspects of the Smith Act Prosecutions,” *American Communist History*, 13:1 (2014), 33.

¹⁸⁸ Kurt Ritter, “Drama and legal Rhetoric: The Perjury Trials of Alger Hiss.” *The Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 49 (Spring 1985), 83-102.

¹⁸⁹ Among the defendants were Jack Stachel, Editor of the *Daily Worker*, John Gates, leader of the young Communist League, and Irving Potash, a Furriers’ Union leader and self-declared “citizen of the world.” In John J. Abt, Michael Myerson, *Advocate and Activist: Memoirs of an American Communist Lawyer*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 215.

¹⁹⁰ Erik Bruce, “Dangerous World, Dangerous Liberties,” *American Communist History*, 34.

¹⁹¹ Virginia Carmichael, *Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvi-xviii.

¹⁹² “Zudem bin ich noch nicht Amerikabürger und es sind neue Vorschriften herausgekommen die für nur halbe Amerikaner wie ich es bin die größten Schwierigkeiten machen und eine Rückkehr sehr erschweren und bei der

Living in Manhattan, Beckmann would have been hard pressed not to have taken note of the widely mediatized proceedings. Therefore, his decisions to openly associate with red-leaning artists, to join the Artist Equity Association and to make public statements during these contentious years, constituted a decisive and remarkable turn for an individual who had completely withdrawn from committing to any political conviction, who was worried about associations, and who had avoided making any unequivocal statements during his Amsterdam exile. Even though Artist Equity was conceived as an apolitical institution to benefit the members' economic standing in society, it soon became identified with political connotations. In fact, it did not take long for George Dondero to denounce Artist Equity on the grounds that its officers, directors, and governors had dangerous left wing connections. In the 1949 Congressional Records, Dondero's defamatory remarks about Artist Equity reaffirmed its and modern art's alleged connection to Communism:

Let me trace for you a main artery from the black heart of the isms of the Russian Revolution to the very heart of art in America.[...] we are now face to face with the intolerable situation, where public schools, colleges, and universities, [...] invaded by a horde of foreign art manglers, are selling to our young men and women a subversive doctrine of 'isms,' Communist-inspired and Communist-connected which have one common, boasted goal – the destruction of our cultural tradition and priceless heritage. ... from the 'pen and brush phalanx of the communist conspiracy' had come the 'front' organizations of the thirties: The John Reed Clubs, the League of American Artist Congress, and their successors, such as Artist Equity.¹⁹³

This development worried even some American members of Yasuo Kuniyoshi's circle who considered, but were hesitant of joining the association. A letter from Henry Schnakenburg to Yasuo Kuniyoshi illustrates the prevailing fear of public denunciation:

Those present – Alfred Frankfurter, Emily Genauer, Alfred Barr, Eloise and Otto Spaeth, Bob Hale, Lloyd Goodrich, Aline Louchheim, Antoinette Kraushaar, and a few others are all friends of Equity and want very much to see us take the very important place that we rightfully should take. At the meeting and after to me personally several of them stated that they feel Equity is in a dangerous position with so many radical leanings in key positions. This, they consider, leaves us open to private and public attacks and also

jetzigen plötzlich aufgeflamnten Spionageangst fast unmöglich machen." Brief an Minna Beckmann-Tube, Oakland, 24. Juli [1950], in Klaus Gallwitz et al., ed. *Max Beckmann. Briefe*, Vol. III, 334.

¹⁹³ Jane Hart de Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," 772.

prevents a number from joining who would otherwise do so if they had more confidence that Equity was not just another ‘front’ organization.¹⁹⁴

Given the surrounding atmosphere of mistrust, of suspected political allegiances, it is indeed surprising that Max Beckmann joined Artist Equity Association. On December 10, 1948, Yasuo Kuniyoshi sent a letter to Max Beckmann (**Figure 7**):



Figure 7. “Artist Equity Association letter to Max Beckmann,” December 10, 1948, Max Beckmann Papers, Correspondence 1940-1950, reel 1341:0174.

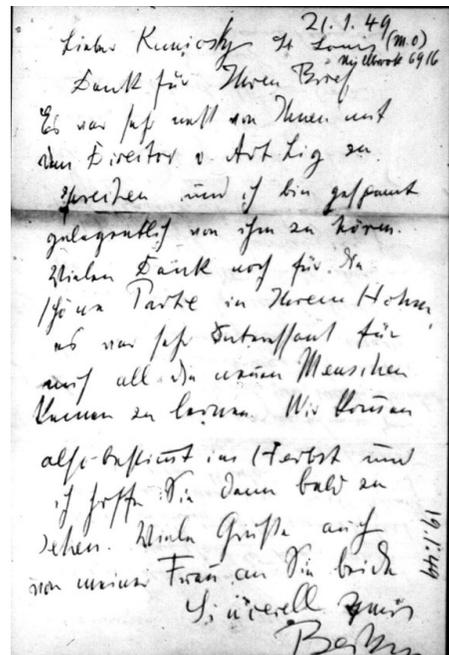


Figure 8. “Letter from Max Beckmann to Yasuo Kuniyoshi,” January 21, 1949, Max Beckmann Papers, Correspondence 1940-1950, reel 1341:0652.

I am very pleased to know that you will be in New York the end of this month, we are also all very glad to welcome you as a member of Equity. At a meeting of our Executive Committee this week, it was decided that Equity would like very much to honor you while you are here. We are therefore planning to hold a cocktail party, either on December 29th or 30th, at which time Equity members will have the opportunity of meeting you. [...] I expect that it will be held at the Plaza Hotel.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Letter from Henry Schnakenburg to Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers*, Artist Equity Association 1946-1952, undated, Box 1, Folder 19, slide 15.

¹⁹⁵ Artist Equity Association letter to Max Beckmann, Correspondence 1940-1950, *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1341:0174.

The relationship between Beckmann and Kuniyoshi was not just professional. Beckmann's full-page response — indicative of his esteem for Kuniyoshi and unlike his usual taciturn replies scribbled right into the correspondence he received — reveals that Beckmann shared with Kuniyoshi his plans about relocating to New York, his forthcoming teaching position at the Art Students League, and that Beckmann and Quappi had been invited to Kuniyoshi's house for dinner (**Figure 8**).¹⁹⁶

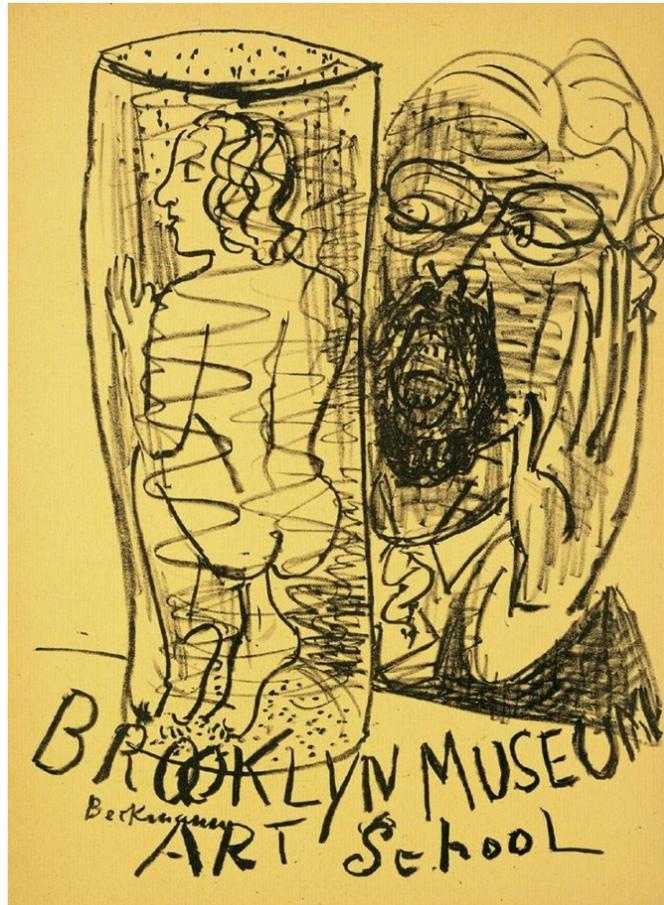


Figure 9. Max Beckmann, *Im Glas*, 1950, Lithography, in *Improvisation* published by Artist Equity for their Spring Fantasia Masquerade Ball on May 19, 1950 in the Hotel Astor, New York.

¹⁹⁶ Letter from Max Beckmann to Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Correspondence 1940-1950, *Max Beckmann Papers*, Correspondence, reel 1341:0652 and reel 1341:0174-0175. see also: Freitag, 16. April 1948. [...] "Briefe an Valentin und Kuniyoshi." Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 260; and Mittwoch, 29. September 1948: "Abends Briefe an Artist Equity, Boulder, Philadelphia. Göpel und Beckmann," *Tagebücher*, 290.

Beckmann's involvement with Artist Equity — emblematically illustrated by a lithograph Beckmann produced for the Artist Equity Ball in 1950 (**Figure 9**) — and his friendship with Yasuo Kuniyoshi have not been discussed in scholarly literature. It cannot be overstated how out of character this friendship with an outspoken advocate and this public association with a politically disparaged group were for Beckmann. Certainly, the prospect of economic backing and support of an easier integration into his new environment undoubtedly attracted the artist, but his membership cannot solely be ascribed to the economic benefits Artist Equity proposed for their members. Even during the Dutch exile — before, during and after the war — when he was most vulnerable and financially worse off than in the United States, Beckmann did not join any of the exile artist groups active in Europe at the time, such as the *Freier Künstlerbund*, and did not want to be associated with politicized artists.¹⁹⁷ Beckmann's uncharacteristic behavior, particularly in light of his precarious employment and immigration status, almost inevitably must be viewed as an attempt of the artist to take a stance in response to the controversies around him.

Max Beckmann's decision to speaking publicly in the United States also marked a decisive turn away from his prior refusal to vocalize any views concerning the arts and his own art during the National Socialist era and Amsterdam exile. He did not return to the explicit and programmatic statements that were issued during the early Weimar period, but the speeches he gave while travelling the United States give testimony of Beckmann's critical engagement with the cultural concerns of the time.

Before he arrived in the United States, he had been informed by his long-time friend and supporter J. B. Neumann about prevalent anti-German sentiments and it would have been easy for him to evoke his past persecution and denounce the past German regime's cultural politics.¹⁹⁸ A clear disassociation with these policies and a reaffirmation of him as the victim of discriminatory practices of the National Socialists would have vindicated Beckmann and would have perhaps made it easier for curators and critics to disassociate his art from his nationality which still carried negative associations due to the menace of Nazi Germany. But Beckmann did not address the cultural politics of the National Socialists nor his activities during the Weimar era that had affected his practice so profoundly. Instead, he applied himself to current concerns.

¹⁹⁷ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 300. See also: Stephanie Barron, et al., *Exile and Emigrées*, 49.

¹⁹⁸ J. B. Neumann wrote in a letter to Beckmann about the American viewpoint of Germany as “the most Godforsaken of all Nations,” March 26, 1927, *J.B. Neumann Papers*, microfilm roll NJBN 3, frame 17.

In February of 1948, Max Beckmann was invited by Pierre Montminy, an artist and teacher, to visit Stephen's College, in Columbia, Missouri, and give a speech.¹⁹⁹ Stephen's College was an institution exclusively for women, which may have influenced the way Beckmann conceived his speech and his decision to refer to the female painter in the title *Letters to a Woman Painter*. Arguably, however, it was a consideration of the student generation at large that he thought of when he wrote the speech, rather than a single female student or painter. This notion is further substantiated by the fact that he read the same speech at different locations, to many other students, without altering the title. In any case, the intended audience was most likely aware of the ongoing strife between academic, traditionalist and modern, abstract expressions.

In the first part of the speech, Beckmann spells out how he thinks about the opposing poles — academic traditionalist and modern abstract art — involved in the current debates:

Abstract things bore you just as much as academic perfections. [...] the important thing is first of all to have a real love for the visible world that lies outside ourselves as well as to know the deep secret of what goes on within ourselves. For the visible world in combination with our inner selves provides the realm where we may seek infinitely for the individuality of our own souls. In the best of art this search has always existed. It has been strictly speaking, a search for something abstract. And today it remains urgently necessary to express even more strongly one's own individuality. Every form of significant art from Bellini to Henri Rousseau has ultimately been abstract.²⁰⁰

According to Beckmann, both positions in art, academic and abstract, lack meaning unless they are imbued with the artist's individual input. Perhaps in response to the continuing debates, Beckmann offers a relativization of the term abstraction itself, as he argues that one can express abstract concerns even with figurative expressions. Beckmann's claim that it "remains urgently necessary to express even more strongly one's own individuality" is a rejection of the attempts to partition art into classificatory categories and 'isms,' something he had been opposed to since the Weimar era. The speech is not only a rejection of the conservative and volatile denunciation of modern art, it also functions in opposition to the aspersions directed at artists who do not conform to the prescribed dominant canon. This, as he alluded to in his speech, applies to both positions on the spectrum, not only the politically charged attacks by Dondero who himself was favoring academic art, but also Greenberg's authoritarian solicitation of abstract, autonomous art avoiding

¹⁹⁹ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 313-317.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

political content. Beckmann's speech and approach is therefore both a justification and appeal for his audience to employ any stylistic mode as long as it is inserted with individual meaning.

In the second part of the speech Beckmann elaborates on what he felt was paramount in art: to strike a balance. Balance plays a crucial role in the life of the artist, as she needs to find harmony between the temptations of life (passion and beautiful intoxication) and work discipline (a restraint from all those worldly pleasures). But the artist also needs to strike balance in her expectations of and dependency on positive feedback by critics and the audience, what Beckmann called "the glory:"

Never again, you said, never again shall my will be slave to another. [...] You have built yourself a house of ice crystals and you have wanted to forge three corners or four into a circle. But you cannot get rid of that little 'point' that gnaws in your brain, that little 'point' that means 'the other one.' Under the cold ice the passion still gnaws, that longing to be loved by another [...] And for that reason you are an artist, my child!²⁰¹

Beckmann, who had lived in self-imposed exile for almost ten years, restricted from the communication and resonance he was used to, most likely references here the effects the isolated work in exile had on him, his repressed desire for critical acclaim, and may also refer to the increasingly hostile environment and critical reception for artists working in the figurative abstract style in the U.S.

Barring the way to the "realm of atmospheres, and self-will and passion," Beckmann addresses again the meritless strife between academic and abstractionist style in the third part. Beckmann proposes that art should not blindly and carelessly imitate nature or drift into "sterile abstractions which will hardly reach the level of decorative art."²⁰² Rather, art should be imbued with true abstraction and feature a personal facet such as joy or pain. In the closing paragraph, he once again offers encouragement to the artists:

I think much of you and your work, and from my heart wish you power and strength to find and follow the good way. It is very hard with its pitfalls left and right. I know that. We are all tightrope walkers. With them it is the same as with artists, and so with all mankind. As the Chinese philosopher Laotse says, we have 'the desire to achieve balance, and to keep it.'²⁰³

²⁰¹ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 315.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

The speech elicited consistently positive reactions and Beckmann was given the opportunity to read his speech again at several other extremely prestigious locations throughout the United States: Mills College in the San Francisco Bay area, The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the University of Colorado in Boulder, and Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. The speech was also published in the *College Art Journal* in 1949 and read on a radio show broadcast from St. Louis.²⁰⁴ Beckmann's repeated encouragement to the younger generation to follow their own individual convictions, was not simply an attempt to persuade the younger generation to follow his own preferred personal style, but an appeal to withstand the designating tendencies artists were facing. Acknowledging the volatile surroundings, he emboldens the artists to stay true to themselves.

It has been argued that Beckmann's discourse was an explicit demarcation of his work from the contemporary trend of Abstract Expressionism.²⁰⁵ However, in light of the post-war cultural and political trends of which Beckmann was aware, it seems highly unlikely that Abstract Expressionism was his sole or even primary concern in this speech. The general rejection of biased compartmentalization that exposed artists to attacks emerges as a much more reasonable motivation to suggest for the textual layout of his speech. The speech was not only resonating on a personal level, but was furthermore an indication that Beckmann was aware of the continued validity of his convictions at that time. Only if art and artists are freed from labelling will conditions exist for an expression of true abstraction and signify "the individuality of our own souls."²⁰⁶

The allegory of his tightrope dancer is compelling. Arguably, Beckmann himself felt like he was balancing on a tightrope, having to withstand on one hand the expectations of making political statements referring to his past, and on the other hand having to avoid to be positioned as a radical, Bolshevik or politically motivated artist in order to find acceptance in the U.S., all the while knowing about the stigmatization artists were exposed to when working in a political vein. Beckmann's *Letters to a Woman Painter* speech is a testament to the fact that Beckmann was highly aware of his surroundings and in itself illustrates the quandaries he faced in the United

²⁰⁴ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 312.

²⁰⁵ Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, 67.

²⁰⁶ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 314.

States. He purposely kept the speech innocuous, as he did with his paintings, because he too still had to avoid the “pitfalls left and right.”²⁰⁷

Beckmann’s recommendation to balance between the two extremes and his justification of figurative abstractions may have been partly influenced by him leaving the “house of ice crystals,” his re-entry into the public eye and exposure to public opinion. We know he monitored his exhibition reviews and resented negative criticism. An example of this resentment can be found in his diary on May 16, 1948 when he wrote about the upcoming retrospective exhibition in St. Louis: “the modern academic snob will rant, the public as well – the whole thing is 100 years too early.”²⁰⁸ While economic success could have been a motivating factor to highlight an unassuming approach, the fact that he was anticipating rebuke from the general public and academic proponents alike, indicates Beckmann’s awareness of currents and developments in the art world.

Beckmann’s attempt to strike a balance seems to have worked in his favor, at least from time to time. *LOOK Magazine*, which not long before had attacked the modern expressions of Kuniyoshi and others in the *Advancing American Art Exhibition*, featured Kuniyoshi and Beckmann in an article honoring the best ten American painters of the time.²⁰⁹ As they now stated:

The winning list registers more advanced opinion than might have been expected. Imaginative and highly individual work has been chosen. Almost totally rejected among the winners are the surrealists and very abstract work. Results also show no regard for old-fashioned, ultra-realistic painting still favored by large sections of the public. This is a high quality, middle-of-the-road selection that will be questioned both by arch conservatives and by the most advanced abstractionists.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ The evening after the event, Beckmann spent with Montminy’s and other artists. His diary entry of the day reveals that discussions at dinner circled around American politics: „Dann Abendessen bei P. Montminy’s, später noch ein Mr. Th. aus Detroit und mit Frau und ein abwesender Dichter aus New York. Beim Essen sprach Montminy viel über Amerikapolitik.” Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 236: Mittwoch, 4. Februar 1948.

²⁰⁸ When thinking about the retrospective exhibition that was being organized in St. Louis in 1948, Beckmann worried about how his oeuvre would be received and made the following pessimistic analysis: “now the exhibition is nearing and everybody is panting. The fuss of the press is imminent, the people curios . . . tomorrow won’t be any different and ‘true love’ – my god. The modern academic snob will be ranting, the public too – therefore the matter is 100 years too early.” Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 264.

²⁰⁹ Letter from *LOOK Magazine* to Max Beckmann, January 16, 1948. *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1340:656.

²¹⁰ “Are these Men the Best Painters in America Today? Results of the LOOK 1948 Pool of Museum Directors and Art Critics.” *LOOK Magazine*, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers*, Printed Material: Miscellaneous 1934-1975, Box 3 (hol), Folder 4, slide 14.



Figure 10. "Are These Men The Best Painters in America Today?" *LOOK Magazine* Article, January 1948, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers*, Printed Material: Miscellaneous 1934-1975, Box 3 (hol), Folder 4: 14.

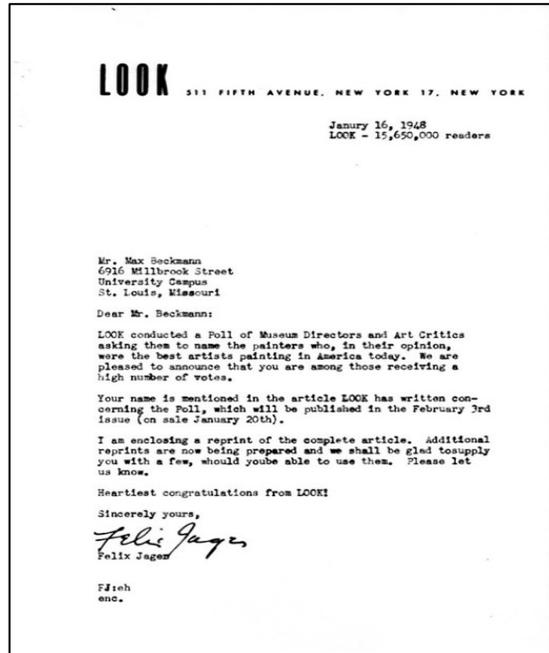


Figure 11. "Letter from LOOK Magazine to Max Beckmann," January 16, 1948. *Max Beckmann Papers*, reel 1340: 656.

The polls were the results of *LOOK* consulting sixty-eight leading museum directors, curators, and art critics and not a result of their own evaluation; a notion illustrated by the fact that the election results were challenged in the title: "Are these Men the Best Painters in America Today? Results of the LOOK 1948 Pool of Museum Directors and Art Critics." (Figure 10 and Figure 11) The article mirrors Beckmann's concern that at this particular point in time, figurative abstractionists were facing harsh criticism from both conservatives and representatives of the avant-garde alike.

Entangled in Modern Art Controversies

Beckmann found himself entangled in another contentious moment concerning modern art that took place in Boston in 1948. On February 17, James Plaut, director of the Boston Institute for Modern Art, had released a polemical manifesto "*Modern Art*" and *the American Public* (Figure

9).²¹¹ Many artists took offence to his formulations in which he called modern art “a cult of bewilderment” that had “come to signify for millions something unintelligible, even meaningless.”²¹² As an accompaniment to the manifesto, the Boston museum decided to change its name to ‘Institute of Contemporary Art.’²¹³ In 1938, the Museum had already changed its original name from ‘the Boston Museum of Modern Art,’ an offshoot from its New York namesake, to ‘the Boston Institute of Modern Art,’ in order to indicate its separate status. This time, in 1948, the name change was meant to signal the final independence from MoMA in New York and its collection practices, while simultaneously offering a new definition of vanguard art.²¹⁴ Plaut’s motivation, however, was misunderstood and he failed to articulate his reasoning in the accompanying manifesto. *The New York Times* published a lengthy report on the controversy. Written by Aline Louchheim and entitled: “‘Modern’ or ‘Contemporary’ – Words or Meanings,” it initially gave some praise to Plaut’s discourse:

We have been seeing all of modern art [...] – all the experiments, all the expressions, all the ‘isms’. The trouble is, however, that we have been shown it with too few distinctions, too few standards, too reluctant and timorous criticism. Thousands of people paint today and none is disregarded, however banal or imitative or exaggerated his statement. [...] Shock-value and fashionableness have been exploited. [...] This lack of standards and the extremisms of the lesser men have in fact created such bewilderment and confusion that a reaction was inevitable. [...] For the courageous statement of these principles the trustees of the institute and its director, James S. Plaut, deserve all the applause they are getting.

Yet, the author also warned of possible implications from categorizing a wide range of expressions with one (negative) label:

Will the brutal expressionist indictment by Beckmann, for instance, be given ‘forthright interpretation’ despite their personal cabalistic symbols and the fact that the public considers them ‘modern art’? [...] For this reaction against the ‘cult of bewilderment’ can either stimulate a constructive direction or it can stifle all progressiveness and vitality. Already generalities and easy truisms in the press are leading to a new confusion.²¹⁵

²¹¹ It was a joint publication with the Institute’s President. Nelson W. Aldrich and Karl Zerbe, “Modern Art” and the American Public, *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0803.

²¹² “It is reflected in a statement of policy issued last week by the Boston Institute of Modern Art. Believing that the phrase “modern art” is in bad public odor, synonymous with unintelligibility and sham. The institute in a neat semantic maneuver disassociated itself from it by changing its name to “Institute of Contemporary Art.” Aline B. Louchheim, “‘Modern’ or ‘Contemporary’ – Words or Meaning?” *The New York Times*, Feb 22, 1948, X8.

²¹³ Christopher Shea, “Modern and Contemporary: The Break Up,” *Boston Globe*, July 28, 2013, K4.

²¹⁴ Judith A. Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 322.

²¹⁵ Aline B. Louchheim, “‘Modern’ or ‘Contemporary’ – Words or Meaning?” *The New York Times*, Feb 22, 1948, X8.

Indeed, many Boston area artists who had been supported by Plaut before, were baffled by and in furor over the manifesto. The artist Karl Zerbe acted immediately and organized the Modern Artist Group alongside fellow Expressionist painter David Aronson, both members of Artist Equity, and staged in Boston on March 21, 1948, several protests in response to Plaut's manifesto and the Institute's decision to change its name. As many as three hundred artists were involved.²¹⁶

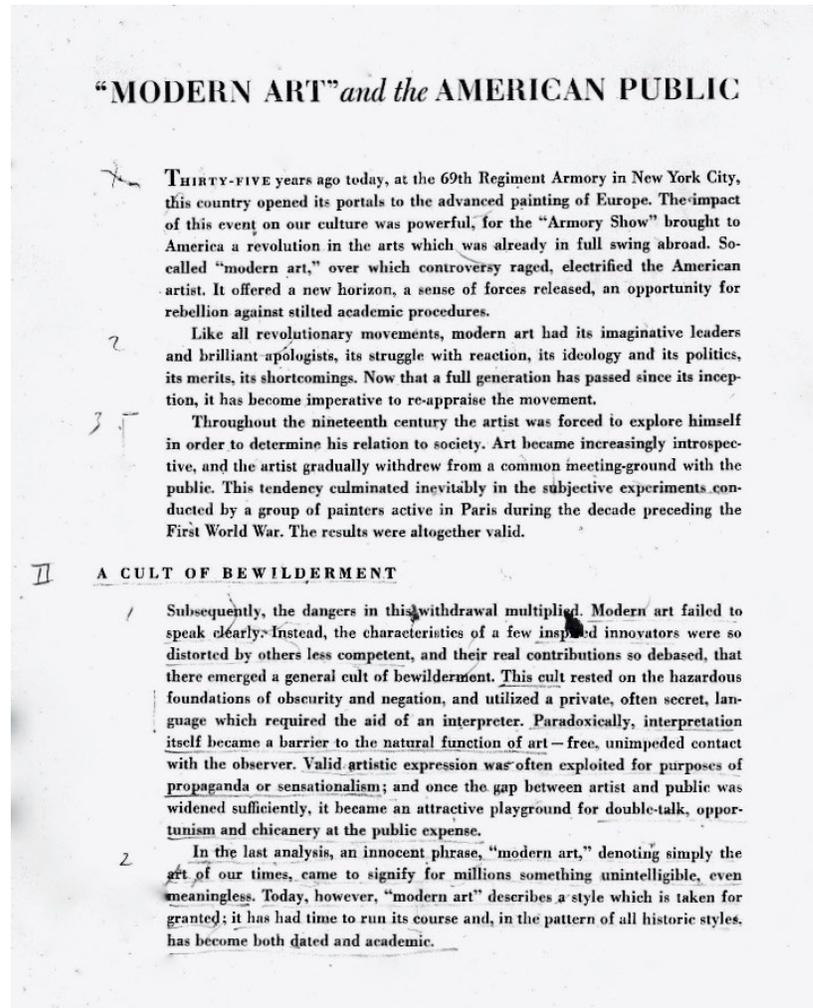


Figure 12. Nelson W. Aldrich and James Plaut, “‘Modern Art’ and the American Public,” *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263: 0803.

²¹⁶ Judith A. Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 227.

Four days later, the Modern Artist Group of Boston set up a panel discussion at the Old South Meeting House in Boston. Joining Karl Zerbe and David Aronson on the panel were Harley Perkins, an artist and art critic, the architect and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Robert Woods Kennedy, the painter Hyman Bloom and Artist Equity member and painter Jack Levine. Spirited statements were read by Beckmann's colleague H.W. Janson, by the painter Karl Knaths, and by chairman and fellow Artist Equity member Lawrence Kupfermann. The introductory statement to the panel discussion read as follows:

The recent manifesto issued by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston has roused a group of Boston artists and educators to call a meeting for discussion in the Old South Meeting House. The Institute's highly sensational manifesto is a fatuous declaration which misinforms and misleads the public concerning the integrity and intention of the modern artist. By arrogating to itself the privilege of telling the artists what art should be the Institute runs counter to the original purposes of this organization whose function was to encourage and to assimilate contemporary innovation. With indignation, the Boston artists resent the injurious meddling of the Institute in the affairs of creative artists. Therefore, the need to uphold the principles of Modern Art for public enlightenment moves the Modern Artists Group to meet and reaffirm the fundamentals inherent in art.²¹⁷

A report in the *Boston Daily Globe* indicates that the protesters charged the Institute with censorship, dictatorship and reactionary policies and demanded the retraction of the manifesto.²¹⁸ Although Plaut's declaration may not have been intended as such, the artists saw in it an encroachment of their freedom of expression and took offence with the manifesto's use of language, particularly the use of the word 'enjoin,' which many saw as a paternalistic, autocratic way of dictating artists what to do and how to paint. Questions were raised about who would then be in a position to judge what is "truth to humanity" and what is not.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ "Report on the Panel Discussion Sponsored by the Modern Art Group of Boston," March 25, 1948, *Alfred Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0824.

²¹⁸ "Charges of 'dictatorship', 'censorship' and 'reactionary policies' were hurled at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art last night, but a group of prominent local artists, protesting a recent statement of the institute which decried the 'excesses of modern art.' [...] two resolutions were passed. One called for [...] a 'public retraction of its statements' [...] the other condemned the Institute's statement 'as a serious harm to modern art, collectors of modern art, and primarily to the freedom of expression of the creative artist.' [...] Robert W Kennedy, assistant professor of architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, termed the statement 'shocking and unprofessional, and at the very worst an intention to suppress and direct the creative arts.'" In "300 Condemn Art Institute for Attack on "Modernism," *Boston Daily Globe*, March 26, 1948, in Newspaper Clippings, *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0813.

²¹⁹ *Magazine of Art*. Vol. 41. April 1948, Number 4, p.122, in Newspaper Clippings, *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0822.

The protest speeches have been preserved in the Alfred Barr papers and they bear testimony to the contentious atmosphere.²²⁰ An excerpt from H. W. Janson's text highlights the extent of emotion raised by the controversial name change of the Institute:

To repudiate the term 'modern art' at this time cannot but give aid and comfort to all the protagonists of die-hard conservatism, ranging from the highest government officers to newspaper critics, who have been carrying on a concerted campaign against modern art ever since the ill-famed incident of the State Department collection [Advancing American Art]. These enemies of the modern movement have long maintained that it is nothing but a 'cult of bewilderment'; for an organization of the standing of the Boston Institute to stoop to the same terminology and this to give its sanction to a prejudice born of ignorance and ill-will, constitutes a major victory for the forces of reaction.²²¹

Karl Zerbe was also given the opportunity to speak up:

In the last few years, a campaign has been waged against progressive art by political interests and law-writers on art. Some of the painters the Institute shows have been debased as degenerate minds in tabloids and the like. [...] the institute says, quote – 'The valid artistic expression was often exploited for purposes of propaganda or sensationalism.' One wonders if it does not use the plight of modern art for the same sinister purpose.²²²

Plaut's manifesto was thus accused of augmenting Dondero's attacks on modern art, which had claimed that modern art was subversive. The Museum of Modern Art in New York also became involved when René d'Harnoncourt, the museum's director, defended the protesting artists and further politicized the issue by declaring modern art to be symbol of freedom in the polarized world of the early Cold War period.²²³ James Plaut himself stated in the aftermath: "we were

²²⁰ "Report of the Panel Discussion sponsored by the Modern Artist Group of Boston," March 25, 1948, *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0824-0826.

²²¹ Horst W. Janson, Beckmann's colleague at the Washington University in St. Louis, was never one to mince his words. Already in 1946 he had made the following statement about the reception of modern art: "It is difficult to suppress the feeling that a vast majority of the American Public, given a choice in the matter, would agree with the policies of the Reichskulturkammer. Here as in Germany, the man in the street regards the modern artist as a 'crazy morbid charlatan', and who would blame him, since his opinion seems to be shared by no less an authority than the present director of the hallowed Metropolitan Museum of Art." H.W. Janson, "Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism," *Magazine of Art*, 39:184 (1946), in Sabine Eckmann, *Caught by Politics*, 119.

²²² "Karl Zerbe Speech," Panel Discussion Sponsored by the Modern Artist Group of Boston," March 25, 1948. *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0828.

²²³ "And here we are with our hard-earned new freedom [...] walls are crumbling all around us and we are terrified by the endless vistas and the responsibility of an infinite choice. it is this terror of the new freedom which removed the familiar signposts from the roads that makes many of us wish to turn the clock back and recover the security of yesterday's dogma. The totalitarian state established in the image of the dogmatic orders of the past is one reflection of this terror of the new freedom. [...] To expect a diversified society to produce a uniform, universally understood art is a measure of our true fear of facing the results of our own advances [...] the perfection of [a] new order [...]"

being attacked by the wrong people and applauded by the wrong people.”²²⁴ Eventually in 1950, realizing the importance of reasserting their stance on this now politically charged controversy and trying to undo some of the damage that was done, the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art reaffirmed in a joint statement the importance of modern art, emphasising that they were "deplor[ing] the reckless and ignorant use of political or moral terms in attacking modern art," distancing themselves from dictatorial tactics — the past Nazi and current Soviet official’s suppression of art.²²⁵

Beckmann travelled to Boston on March 13 and 14 in 1948 to visit Harvard University and the Fogg Art Museum, only two weeks after James Plaut had published his manifesto, and one week before the student protests erupted. In Boston, Beckmann reconnected with Zerbe and met other influential German émigrés: Jakob Rosenberg, who led the Fogg Art Museum; Erwin Panofsky, at the time Professor at New York University;²²⁶ Wilhelm Koehler, who was Professor at Harvard; the art dealer Justin T. Tannhaeuser and the Swarzenski family, Georg, Marie and their son Hanns.²²⁷ Beckmann’s visit to Boston gave him an occasion to present for the second time his speech *Letters to a Woman Painter*. As the first time, his wife Quappi read the speech to the one hundred and eighty-five assembled Museum School students, due to Max Beckmann’s own language insecurities. The contentious moment in time, and the fact that Beckmann chose to repeat the discourse originally conceived for the audience at Stephen’s College, further validates a consideration of the speech as a landmark maxim by the artist.²²⁸

would give us a society enriched beyond belief by the full development of the individual for the sake of the whole. I believe a good name for such a society is democracy, and I also believe that modern art in its infinite variety and ceaseless exploration is its foremost symbol.” René d’Harnoncourt, “Challenge and Promise: Modern Art and Modern Society,” *Magazine of Art* 41: 7 (1948), 252.

²²⁴ Interview with James Plaut, 1971, originally quoted in Reinhold Heller, “The Expressionist Challenge, James Plaut and Institute of Contemporary Art,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston *Dissent: The issue of Modern Art in Boston*, 41.

²²⁵ Judith A. Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 226-228. In a 1971 interview, Plaut still tried to clear up the controversy and stated that the manifesto was conceived in response to the controversial discussions surrounding the associations to the term ‘modern’ art, as an emancipation of the Boston institution from its parent in New York, its exclusively abstract art program, and had intended to represent a more inclusive vision for the Boston Institute. The interview was originally quoted in Reinhold Heller, “The Expressionist Challenge, James Plaut and Institute of Contemporary Art,” Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, *Dissent: The issue of Modern Art in Boston*, 41.

²²⁶ Erwin Panofsky was later attacked by Dondero to be one of the worst offenders sympathetic to modernism and foreign “-isms.” Jane Hart de Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” 772.

²²⁷ Annabelle Kienle, *Max Beckmann in Amerika*, 52.

²²⁸ While there is not an explicit reference in Beckmann’s diaries about whether he knew of the controversies taking place in Boston, his initial excitement about the trip quickly turned to indifference when he stated on March 9, 1948:

Beckmann and Janson had the chance to discuss the protests in Boston when they returned to St. Louis. On April 1, 1948, just a few weeks after the events and Beckmann's trip to Boston, Janson and his wife visited Beckmann and Quappi at their apartment in St. Louis. Beckmann seemed full of resignation when he writes at the end of the day into his diary: "Jansons came over in the evening, they also won't change the world."²²⁹ Beckmann must have felt despair in consideration of the discussions that took place in Boston and have been unsettled by the question whether he would indeed be given "forthright interpretation" under these circumstances as it had been raised by Aline Louchheim.

Certainly, a highlight and possibly the crowning moment in Beckmann's American years since his vile denouncement and the revocation of his teaching position by the National Socialists, was the honorary doctorate that was bestowed upon him in front of two thousand students by the Washington University in St. Louis.²³⁰ Kenneth Hudson, the Dean of the School of Art at Washington University gave the following portrayal to introduce the artist:

I have the honor to present Max Beckmann, artist and teacher. Master of the art of painting, he fought courageously and without compromise for the right of the artist to express his personal vision and to condemn all bigotry and despotism. Defamed by the Nazi dictators, he fled Germany to self-imposed exile in Amsterdam. Soon overtaken by the invasion, he precariously survived the occupation – all the while placing on canvas his denunciation of all that strives to destroy the dignity and humanity of man. His paintings, philosophical in concept, monumental in execution, rank among the major works of our century. Washington University is proud to have counted him among its faculty. I commend him to you for the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts.²³¹

Several activities were planned for the commencement week activities and Beckmann had been asked to give a lecture "on any subject relating to painting that is close to your heart at this time, leaving the subject entirely up to you."²³² Beckmann gave a speech on June 5, 1950 in front of an audience of about one hundred people, among them friends, former students, and faculty associates, including Mr. and Mrs. Perry Rathbone, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Curt Valentin,

"I don't expect much from Boston anymore and not much from life either," a day before his departure. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 241.

²²⁹ Ibid., 258.

²³⁰ "Miss Guernsey To Get Washington U. Degree," *Seymore Daily Tribune*, Indiana, Monday, June 5, 1950: 1.

²³¹ "Press Release in the Washington University Archives," in Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 401.

²³² Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 318.

and Mr. and Mrs. Morton D. May. For the topic, Beckmann decided to speak once again about the categorization and politicization of art:

Friends have asked me to say something about art during this reunion. Should one embark again in the discussion of this old theme, which never arrives at a satisfactory conclusion because everyone can speak only for himself? [...] Purposely I have avoided commenting on the various art theories, as I am a sworn enemy of putting art into categories. Personally, I think it is high time to put an end to all isms, and to leave the individual the decision whether a picture is beautiful, bad, or boring. Not with your ears shall you see, but with your eyes.²³³

Unlike Beckmann's *Letters to a Woman Painter*, which was translated by Quappi and Perry T. Rathbone, Beckmann had the help of Jane Sabersky to transcribe this text to English.²³⁴ In this speech, the "various art theories," were translated from the original German 'Kampfparolen,' a much stronger metaphor which is closer in meaning to 'fighting slogans.' The discrepancy certainly makes a difference. The fighting slogans, which Beckmann had thought of in his original draft for the speech, may well be a reference to the inflammatory rhetoric of George Dondero, who had accused the "subversive doctrine of isms" of infiltrating American art, or the manifesto of James Plaut, who had proclaimed that modern art was a "cult [that] rested on the hazardous foundation of obscurity and negation."²³⁵ Beckmann's speech is yet another reaffirmation of his strong belief that only an individualist approach to the reception of art can be a valid one and that it is on the viewer to recognize, rather than trying to attribute a work to a category or an '-ism.' It is this speech, where Beckmann sums up his understanding of art in a powerful statement: "Greatness can be achieved in every form of art; it depends alone on the fertile imagination of the individual to discover this."²³⁶

The atmosphere of these years was still very much characterized by ideological associations and confusion surrounding the term 'modern art,' even artists playing off against each other. In 1950, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City was in the planning stages of *American Painting Today*, a national competitive exhibition, which was supposed to

²³³ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 319.

²³⁴ Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 374. Jane Sabersky had been Curt Valentin's assistant and was working as supervisor in the Department of Circulating Exhibitions at MoMA: <https://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/EAD/Saberskyf>

²³⁵ James Plaut, "Modern Art and The American Public," in *Alfred H. Barr Papers*, reel 3263:0803.

²³⁶ Barbara Copeland Buenger, *Self-Portrait in Words*, 320.

represent a cross-section of contemporary painting and bring out new talent.²³⁷ Artist Equity had campaigned for the exhibition as they felt that contemporary art was underrepresented at the institution, a claim that H. W. Janson's had already made in 1946, when he stated that a good portion of the general public thinks of the modern artist as a "crazy morbid charlatan," and that the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Francis Henry Taylor, shared this anti-modernist attitude. Ironically, another group of painters, consisting mostly of exponents of the emerging Abstract Expressionist movement and who later came to be known as the 'Irascibles,' voiced their concerns over what they saw as the unjust selection of artists and representatives on the jury for *American Painting Today* in an open letter to the president of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, already in May of that year. *The New York Times* reported on the matter on their front page of May 22:

18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan; Charge 'Hostility to Advanced Art:' 18 well-known advanced American painters have served notice on the Metropolitan Museum of Art that they will not participate in a national exhibition at the museum in December because the award juries are "notoriously hostile to advanced art." [...] the choice of the jurors "does not warrant any hope that a just proportion of advanced art will be included." [...] Mr. Newman, one of the artists, explained that he and his colleagues were critical of the membership of all five regional juries established for the exhibition but were specifically opposed to the New York group, the "National Jury of Selection" and the "Jury of Awards." The New York jurors are Charles Burchfield, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, [and] Leon Kroll.²³⁸

Paradoxically, the exhibition featured artists who had previously been accused of representing radicalism in modern art: Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Ben Shan, and Romare Bearden had all been part of the ill-fated *Advancing American Art*.

The reception of the show was mixed. The day after its opening on December 7, *The New York Times* wrote enthusiastically that the show had "implications beyond the confines of the American art field."²³⁹ About a week later, however, Howard Devree posted a more critical account in the same publication which seemed to mirror the Abstract Expressionist group's concerns, lamenting that "some of the disappointment [...] is due to the fact that so much of the

²³⁷ The Metropolitan Museum, New York, "American Painting Today, 1950: A National Competitive Exhibition," Exhibition Catalogue, Thomas, J. Watson Library, The Met, Digital Collections.

<http://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15324coll10/id/175143>

²³⁸ "18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan; Charge 'Hostility to Advanced Art,'" *New York Times*, May 22, 1950: 1.

²³⁹ "American Painters on View," *New York Times*, December 8, 1950: 28.

work is familiar to the point of being repetitious.”²⁴⁰ *TIME Magazine* described the juried show to have surveyed the field of American Art “exhaustively, and exhaustingly as well.” Addressing the preceding controversy surrounding the boycott and criticism of the jury, however, the article proclaimed: “Possibly to rebut the allegation that they were just old fuddy-duddies, the jurors toppled over backward, chose roomfuls of alfalfa-dry, determinedly subjectless and mostly meritless efforts by the Academy of the Left.”²⁴¹

To be sure, Beckmann’s latest *Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket*, which had been chosen for the show, was not a provocative or controversial painting, but it still must have astonished the artist to be included in a show that was simultaneously attacked for giving a platform to left-leaning exponents of American art,²⁴² and overt conservatism and hostility toward modern expression. In his diary, he notes a few weeks before the opening of the exhibition what he felt was a “sensation” that he had been “disembarked from the modern ship.”²⁴³

The exhibition and reaction to it emblemize the shifting conditions in which museum curators and jurors faced accusations of being too radical when showing modernist art works, yet too conservative when excluding the Abstract Expressionists. Painters like Max Beckmann and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, who were working in figurative abstractions, were now faced with a situation in which their art was stacked against the new and thriving movement of Abstract Expressionism.

²⁴⁰ Howard Devree, “Round-up in Detail. Highlights of Exhibition at Metropolitan,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1950: X8.

²⁴¹ “State of Painting,” *TIME Magazine* 56, (December 11, 1950): 72-73.

²⁴² A year later, George Dondero still dwelled on the issue and seized the opportunity to attack Kuniyoshi once again for being a radical member of the overrepresented Artist Equity Association, for its “most ambitious of all the red attempts at art regimentation and control,” and accused the jury of nepotism: “Now let us examine the competitions themselves. The first was called *American Painting 1950*. Six thousand artists throughout the United States entered the competition. The exhibition consisted of 307 oil paintings. Of the 307 paintings selected to compete for the prizes, 170, or 55 percent, were by members of Artist Equity [...] thirteen of those jurors were members of Artist Equity Association. The jury of awards selected to award Metropolitan museum prizes amounting to \$8,500 consisted of one museum director and two artists, both artists were members of Artist Equity. [...] Third prize of \$1,500 to Yasuo Kuniyoshi of New York, radical, and president – at that time – of Artist Equity Association.” Congressional Records, House, March 17, 1952. *George A. Dondero Papers*, reel 722:0351-0353.

²⁴³ “Abends bei X. recht langweilig bis auf die Sensation, dass ich endgültig aus dem “modernen Schiff” ausgebootet bin. – Na fahren wir auf dem Floß weiter.” Samstag, 11. November 1950, Brief an Minna. Göpel und Beckmann, *Tagebücher*, 395.

In the end Kuniyoshi was awarded 3rd prize for his painting “Fish Kite” and won \$1500. The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Francis Henry Taylor, director, “American Painting Today, 1950: A national competitive exhibition,” Metropolitan Museum of Art Publications, Digital collection: <http://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15324coll10/id/175143>

Other painters included in the exhibition: fellow Artist Equity members Leon Kroll, Karl Zerbe, and Lawrence Kupfermann – who were also involved in the Boston protests, – George Biddle, Jack Levine, Fred Conway, Eugene Speicher, Paul Burlin; and the artists Lyonel Feininger, Charles Sheeler and Donald Thrall.

Indeed, the conflicting reactions to the exhibition *American Painting Today* were symbolic for the unparalleled conflation of art and politics in the United States.²⁴⁴ Abstract Expressionism — after an eventual meteoric rise to popularity — would become a major force in the cultural Cold War. Max Beckmann, however, did not have a chance to witness and react to these developments. When he walked to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on December 27, 1950 to see the exhibition, which had opened just under three weeks earlier, he suffered a heart attack, collapsed, and died near Central Park.

Conclusion

When Max Beckmann arrived in the United States in the early fall of 1947, a new chapter on cultural politics' engagement with the arts was beginning to be written, one in which the iconic works of the Abstract Expressionist would become main weapons in the cultural Cold War and a flagship for American democracy abroad. Beckmann, however, arrived in the transitional period, those tempestuous years between the figurative and social art of the depression and the autonomous, Abstract Expressionist art of the fifties and sixties.²⁴⁵ This transitional period was accompanied by much controversy, and artists were subjected to divergent and confusing directives from all sides. It was a period, in which the North American art historical canon broke away from fostering academic and traditionalist regionalism in favor of a new international language, but simultaneously tried to emphasize their disassociation with the political deployment of the arts undertaken by previous and current totalitarian regimes. Encouraged was a liberal approach, the art historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. had called it the “vital center,” to

²⁴⁴ Sadly, the *American Painting Today* debacle was not the last incident in which art and artists were politically smeared: the travelling exhibition *Sport in Art* and *100 American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, both under the sponsorship of the government's USIA, were cancelled in 1956. Among the artists included in *Sport in Art* were once again Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Leon Kroll, and Ben Shahn. Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 216.

The exhibition *American Sculpture* organized in 1951 by the MET elicited the *American Artist Professional League* to draft a “war cry” against the “decadent isms:” “We believe that the time has come for American Artists who hold fast to the time-honored tenets of beauty, craftsmanship and integrity to assert their faith in the cause... for too long a time, and with our habitual American tolerance, we have stood aside and let the sensationalists and revolutionaries take the center of the stage. We have tolerated, without protest, the initiators of the decadent isms which were spawned abroad some decades ago [...] so long have we tolerated this intrusion that it has now gained a disproportionate place in the American art scene.” In Jane Hart de Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” 77.

²⁴⁵ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 175.

bridge the gulf between the two extremes of fascism and communism.²⁴⁶ During this process of upheaval, artists who were representatives of figurative abstractions were vilified for expressing socially critical content, while their art was simultaneously employed in the ideological struggle arising between the bipartisan global power centers. Eventually, the apolitical, autonomous Abstract Expressionism succeeded in becoming the bellwether to promote democracy abroad and the United States as center for vanguard artistic expressions. The formerly politically charged avant-garde artists had to undergo a process of both depoliticisation and repoliticisation in order to reappear in the Western art world of the post-war years.²⁴⁷ These processes affected Max Beckmann's North American practice and engagement with his social network and environment more than has previously been acknowledged in literature.

The arrival in North America marked for Beckmann the escape from a war-ravaged Europe and offered promising economic opportunities. Yet, for the artist the United States was not the land of the "unrestricted aesthetic development"²⁴⁸ as it is often proposed in Max Beckmann scholarship. The micro-historical analysis of Beckmann's American years uncovers that he was indeed deeply enmeshed within a network of protagonists who were active and outspoken against discriminatory processes against artists, and that the political situation affected the reception and exhibition of his work. Such analysis also reveals Beckmann's full awareness of the ongoing and often controversial discussions in the cultural field.

The implications of the cultural Cold War presented several pitfalls for Max Beckmann: while he continued to uphold a neutral position and an innocuous approach, his German nationality, his past considerations of the artist's potential political role and subsequent persecution by the Nazi regime, posed manifold difficulties. Curators and critics readily positioned the artist in a political trajectory to overcome the negative associations afflicted by his nationality, particularly before and during the war. In post-war America, however, when the pendulum swung towards the apolitical abstractions and when politically motivated artists faced increasing discrimination, harassment and libel, considerations of Beckmann to be representative of the American art scene became more frequent. Nevertheless, he was walking a fine line

²⁴⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 174.

²⁴⁷ Benjamin Buchloh discusses this topic in relation to the Russian Constructivist artists Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), 85-110.

²⁴⁸ Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, 55.

adapting to the re- and de-politicisation processes and his literary expressions are the foremost indicator for his full awareness of this balancing act.

Beckmann always had a wide social network and throughout his life used it to his advantage. During exile in Amsterdam, he was able to remain active in the art-making part of his profession because of influential people supporting him. During the war, Beckmann was fully aware that certain associations could be dangerous for him, while associating with Beckmann could also be precarious for others. He protected himself and everybody in his social network, when he burnt his presumably captious diaries when the Nazis invaded Holland in 1940; he also protected himself and everybody in his network when he used code names and encryptions for his friends and supporters thereafter. It is therefore a complete change in character when Beckmann decided to officially join the Artist Equity Association and associate with openly politically active members in the cultural field who were fighting for what Guilbaut coined the “frightening freedom of the brush,”²⁴⁹ during a time when affiliation alone could lead to libel and legal measures.

The induced fear of another global conflict and communism was manifest in the cancellation of *Advancing American Art*, the witch hunts in congress, the criticism by the press, and the dangers of associating with perceived “red” groups. Beckmann’s keen awareness of the contentious debates surrounding arts — initiated by art historians Alfred H. Barr and James Plaut, art critic Clement Greenberg, but also the politician George Dondero — has not been considered in literature but becomes apparent when contextualizing his speeches, diaries, letters and connections within its setting. Beckmann’s social network was not exclusively made up of German émigrés, but was indeed filled with proponents advocating against the state’s discriminatory actions against artists. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Karl Zerbe, H.W. Janson, Stuyvesant van Veen, and Jules Henry were actively engaged in the culture political issues, ardent proponents for artists, and on Dondero’s radar. The associations with politically active figures did pose a risk for Beckmann, whose position in the United States was anything but secure; his long history of being influenced and involved in cultural politics, his silence during the Nazi regime, make his return to open commentary and association all the more significant. Viewing his literal

²⁴⁹ Serge Guilbaut, “The Frightening Freedom of The Brush: The Boston Institute of Contemporary Art and Modern Art” in Institute of Contemporary Art, *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985), 55.

responses as a reaction to the disputed ideologies therefore offers a new reading to Beckmann's artistic expressions.

Certainly, the governmental apparati in Germany as well as in the United States have played and continue to play a decisive role in the art world. By giving or withholding support and opportunities, the state participates and influences the production and distribution of art, therefore affecting artists' activities and networks.²⁵⁰ The social context in which artists operate is therefore of crucial importance when undertaking a micro-historical analysis as was done here. Only in this context can the detailed findings assume meaning. Accordingly, an expansion of scale produces interesting conclusions and, in fact, reveals further areas in need of exploration. As previously stated, Beckmann was one of many avant-garde artists who had fled Hitler's regime of National Socialism and who had found exile in the United States. While Beckmann's case should not be assumed representative, intriguing correlations may appear when considering the shared cultural context with other (exiled) artists.²⁵¹ Giovanni Levi effectively identifies that "microhistory tries not to sacrifice knowledge of individual elements to wider generalization, and in fact accentuates individual lives and events. But, at the same time, it tries not to reject all forms of abstraction since minimal facts and individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomena."²⁵²

Beckmann's time in the United States was cut short due to his sudden death in December 1950 and this relatively short time period made possible a very detailed examination of Beckmann's activities. Yet the full implications and overarching culture-political concerns that had continuously affected Beckmann's profession, become discernible only when applying a macroscopic view onto the entirety of his artistic career. This vantage point reveals as continuous theme the influence that cultural politics had on Max Beckmann throughout the different stations of his life. Indeed, it is a theme that continues to affect the collection of his art works in Germany to this day.

The scope of this thesis did not allow for a stylistic consideration of Max Beckmann's paintings and prints he produced during his years in North America. Yet, acknowledging the

²⁵⁰ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 184.

²⁵¹ Barbara McCloskey's study of the politically outspoken artist George Grosz and his North American exile, for example, offers an interesting comparison to Max Beckmann's case, revealing several parallels between the two painters. Beckmann and Grosz also moved in much of the same circles in New York and faced many of the same challenges. Barbara McCloskey, *The Exile of George Grosz. Modernism, America, and the One World Order* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

²⁵² Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 109.

artist's awareness of the politicized culture he found himself in, one is left wondering how the artist maneuvered around and translated the new challenges he was presented with into his art. It stands to be probed whether these challenges were clearly or covertly manifest in his choice of subject matter and painting style. As previous interpretations of Beckmann's works have highlighted his political past at the expense of present concerns, an evaluation that reflects and recognizes Beckmann's sensible reacting to the political implications arising in the reception of modern art in North America would therefore be fruitful. It is the author's hope that the research developed here, may serve as a foundation for such forthcoming consideration, offering a sharper view of Max Beckmann's own vision for his future, his position, and his legacy as an artist whose entire career can be considered as a cultural and political balancing act.

Appendix

Timeline of Max Beckmann's time spent in the United States.²⁵³

1947	September 8 – 17, Arrival in New York September 18 – November 14, St. Louis , Missouri November 15 – 19, New York
1947/48	November 20 – January 15, 1948, St. Louis
1948	January 15 – 19, Chicago , Illinois January 19 – February 3, St. Louis , Missouri February 3 – 5, Columbia , Missouri February 5 – March 10, St. Louis , Missouri March 11 – 14, Boston , Massachusetts March 14 – 17, New York March 18 – April 29, St. Louis , Missouri April 29 – May 1, Bloomington , Indiana May 1 – June 1, St. Louis , Missouri June 2 – 5, New York June 5 – 13, ship passage from New York to Rotterdam June 13 – September 14, Amsterdam September 14 – 21, ship passage from Rotterdam to New York September 21 – 26, New York September 27 – December 25, St. Louis , Missouri
1948/49	December 26, 1948 – January 8, 1949, New York
1949	January 9 – 17, St. Louis , Missouri January 18 – 19, Minneapolis , Minnesota January 20 – February 14, St. Louis , Missouri February 14 – 17, Memphis , Tennessee February 17 – April 1, St. Louis , Missouri June 16 – August 28, Boulder , Colorado August 29, Chicago , Illinois
1949/50	August 30 – March 31, New York
1950	April 1 – 3, Bloomington , Indiana April 4, June 2, New York June 3 – 8, St. Louis , Missouri June 10, Los Angeles , California June 11 – July 5, Carmel , California July 5 – August 19, Oakland , California August 22 – December 27, New York

²⁵³ Adapted from Jutta Schütt, *Beckmann & Amerika*, 24.

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