



Elke Ostländer **Self-Affirmation Through Art: Max Beckmann's Self Portrait in Bronze from 1936**

Max Beckmann modeled his larger-than-life self-portrait in 1936 in Berlin. After having been ousted from his teaching position at Frankfurt's Städelschule by the Nazis three years prior, he was living in the city where he had first earned fame as a painter before World War I. In this sculpture, Beckmann's continual soul-searching and steadfastness in the face of adversity are once again on display. Upon closer inspection, however, the work's powerful monumentality undergoes a change. It becomes possible to feel the spells of hesitant doubt and melancholy that dogged Beckmann throughout his life. Both aspects are directly present in the work's formal approach, in the subtle features of its surface: block-like flat shapes contrast with smaller structures modeled in the finest detail. The eyes, mouth, and nose most definitely bespeak the artist's sensitive powers of perception. At the same time, the heavy-set neck and rounded head stand before us as a self-enclosed shape, serene, unmoved. The sculpture marks Beckmann's exploration of the third dimension, his entry into the "invisible space," and that during a time when his artistic endeavors – and thus the very basis of his existence – were in the gravest danger.

The head's air of inner concentration, which could not have been conveyed so intensively with a painter's means alone, also carries over to how its volume relates to its surroundings. "The pursuit of self-affirmation through art [by Beckmann] makes sense. Could he have achieved this aim any better than with the massive self portrait of 1936? Here he proved in the clearest conceivable manner – indeed, in the most palpable manner – that, despite all the reversals that fate had had in store for him, he still was an undeniably present force. Beckmann painted and etched a great many self portraits, with expressions that range from sarcasm to philosophical introspection, from convivial amusement to unyielding pride. But the bronze *Selbstbildnis* exudes calm. It gives practically no hint of bitterness, animated as it is by a searching earnestness. The broad, expressive mouth, its corners turned down, seems poised to speak a weighty truth. The eyes, coolly fixed on the distance, reveal the reserved gaze of the watcher, not of a man of action. The sculpture's heft alone already testifies to a vital force that is hard to suppress." (Stephan Lackner, in: exh. cat. *Skulptur des Expressionismus*, Cologne 1984, p. 65).

The consummate self portrait bust also served as a centerpiece of the artist's painting *Stilleben mit Plastik* (Göpel 448), which he created in that same year of 1936. "An imperator, as strong-willed as he is long-suffering; but seen in profile, contrary to the sculptural intent, a sensitive and frank head that speaks, as it were. The inner and the outer worlds, the unity of opposites – Beckmann transfigures them in a triumphant still life in which he juxtaposes the 'black human countenance' of his self-portrait with the blossoms of cyclamen atop a pink tablecloth, springing to life like birds on the wing: in the midst of life's beauty, a somber salutation from eternity." (Fritz Erpel: Max Beckmann, *Leben im Werk, Die Selbstbildnisse*, Munich 1985, p. 62).

Beckmann kept the plaster model of the sculptural self portrait in his studio all his life. He had taken it with him in 1937 upon leaving Berlin for exile in Amsterdam; from there, the work accompanied him to the United States in 1949. Upon Beckmann's passing, his widow Quappi preserved a stone casting of the work in New York; this was eventually acquired from her estate in 1993 by the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Except for the present specimen, all of the bronzes cast after the artist's death are currently held in museums and private collections.

10^N Max Beckmann

Leipzig 1884 – 1950 New York

“Selbstbildnis”. 1936

Bronze with black patina. 35.5 × 30 × 30 cm
(14 × 11 ¾ × 11 ¾ in.). The bronze will be included in the catalogue raisonné of sculptures by Max Beckmann by Mayen Beckmann, Berlin. One of 6 posthumous bronze casts. Cast from 1968 by Roman Bronze Works INC, New York. [3202]

Provenance

Catherine Viviano Gallery, New York / Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York / Robert Gore Rifkind Foundation, Los Angeles (1968) / Private Collection, Switzerland

EUR 250,000–350,000

USD 275,000–385,000

Exhibition

Max Beckmann. New York, Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1981 / German Expressionist Sculpture. Los Angeles, County Museum of Art; Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Cologne, Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, 1984, cat. no. 29 / Max Beckmann Retrospective. Saint Louis, Art Museum; Los Angeles, County Museum of Art; Munich, Haus der Kunst; Berlin, Nationalgalerie, 1984/85 / Los Angeles, County Museum of Art, 1985 (permanent loan) / Max Beckmann. Zurich, Galerie Caratsch, de Pury & Luxembourg, 2004, cat. no. 23

Literature and illustration

Anonymous: An Appeal for Empathy. In: Art in America, November 1984, p. 123, ill. / Cornelia Stabenow: Metaphern der Ohnmacht. Zu den Plastiken Max Beckmanns. In: Max Beckmann. Retrospektive. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen and Haus der Kunst; Berlin, Nationalgalerie; Saint Louis, Art Museum; Los Angeles, County Museum of Art, 1984/85, p. 139–146, here p. 143 / Andreas Franzke: Max Beckmann. Skulpturen. Munich, Piper, 1987, p. 34–36, 42 / Auction 7791: Impressionist & Modern Art. Part. I. New York, Sotheby's, 8.5.2002, cat. no. 49, ill.

Of the seven existing casts, except for our specimen, all our currently held in important public museums: Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum der Bildende Künste Leipzig; Saint Louis Art Museum; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich and Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (stone cast).

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