



Eugen Blume In exile in 1938, Max Beckmann painted his wife at the beach – without a doubt one of the loveliest Quappi portraits

In the summer of 1925, Max Beckmann painted himself and his young fiancée Matilde Quappi von Kaulbach as a pair of costumed carnival revelers (Göpel 240) in what can be understood as an allegorical self-examination on the relationship between the sexes, one of Beckmann's major topics. His betrothed was twenty years his junior, after all, and Beckmann surely was aware of the potential pitfalls such a union entailed. It was one month after their wedding on 1 September 1925 in Munich that Beckmann painted the first portrait of his wife (Göpel 245). He had met her in Vienna in 1923, at the home of the von Motesiczky family, friends of the von Kaulbachs. Just nineteen at the time, the musically talented Quappi had already studied the violin and was training as a singer, just as Beckmann's first wife Minna had done. Following her marriage, however, Quappi renounced her career as a musician and thenceforth placed her life entirely at her artist husband's service. The numerous portraits Beckmann painted of Quappi testify to his attentive and grateful love for her, while also acknowledging her willingness to sacrifice her independence and to embrace his own rather prickly personality.

The couple enjoyed a comfortable life together until 1933, when the Nazis came to power and Beckmann was abruptly dismissed from his teaching position at the Städelschule school of applied arts in Frankfurt am Main. In 1937, after the Hitler regime had banned all modern art, including that of Beckmann (590 of his works were confiscated), the couple decided to go into exile in the Netherlands, absconding practically overnight. The early days in Amsterdam proved difficult and 1938, the year in which *Quappi mit grünem Sonnenschirm* was painted, was marked by anything but material comfort. Which makes this untroubled and enrapturing apotheosis in paint of the 34-year-old Quappi all the more astonishing. For we see no allusion here to her personal lot, just one year before the outbreak of World War II. Perhaps the buoyant spirit had to do with the fact that the couple by now were planning to relocate to France and were looking forward to life in the elegance of Paris.

It is an unusual portrait in every respect. Indeed, among the many existing likenesses of Quappi, there is none that so unabashedly highlights her erotic allure.

Beckmann paints his young wife in a beguiling dress, a green parasol resting casually over her shoulder, seated in a yellow wicker chair, evidently on the beach of either Zandvoort or Scheveningen, not far from Amsterdam. Although we can expect to see apotropaic symbols in a Beckmann image – might the weirdly cropped, shadowy brown figure under the horizon line on the right be just such a talisman serving to ward off potential perils? – the portrait's overall effect is that of an overwhelming sensuality, paying homage to feminine beauty in general while celebrating the seductive aura of Quappi in particular. We note how artfully her figure has been placed: Thrust forward into the picture space, she occupies it diagonally, sitting slightly askance, her legs crossed. Placing her right arm to the back, she supports herself with spread fingers against the armrest of the chair. The artist uses the sitter's upright posture to intensify the erotic tension, stoking it further through details such as the drooping right strap of her dress

Quappi embraces Max Beckmann at the beach in Viareggio, 1929

and the hem that has slipped up on her legs, the red knee-high stockings, the flashy earrings, and the two flowers Beckmann places with studied randomness across his wife's naked thighs (cf. *Lesende Frau*, Göpel 350). The left leg, with its half-high stocking, is rendered with such plasticity that it seems to jut out of the image. The entire figure is outlined by a black border, within which colours enticingly shape the body.

The sun hovers obliquely behind Quappi in a slightly clouded sky, illuminating her right side, while the parasol throws a shadow over her face, shoulder, and arm. All of which serves to only intensify the subject's exotic charm as she looks contemplatively into the distance. Yet despite all the sensuality put on display here, she is not the mere object of the male gaze – we are looking at a self-aware seductress and oracle all wrapped into one. Her sultry physicality is inextricably tied to Beckmann's manifest love for her, and cannot fail to ensorcel even the most jaded viewer.

Max Beckmann never painted his portraits from live models but – apart from a few preparatory sketches – created them from memory instead. Painting directly in front of a model usually means giving precedence to one's eye, which constantly double-checks against the objective reality of the sitter. Painting from memory, by contrast, lets the senses take the lead, so that the eye merely focuses on what is projected onto the canvas by the artist's mind. The imagination transcends all retinal powers and plumbs deeper realms of the psyche – this being precisely what Beckmann intended when he painted human beings. *Quappi mit grünem Sonnenschirm* is a visualization of his fantasy, an invention having little to do with questions of verisimilitude or suchlike. Besides paying homage to the artist's young spouse, the painting makes solemn obeisance before the feminine, before the mysterious energies and attractions that can hold sway between a man and a woman. The painter celebrates the eternal magic of erotic joys without in any way asserting a claim to possession. Beckmann elevates the

portrait above and beyond his wife, turning her into an allegorical figure who becomes amalgamated with memories of other women in his life. Thus, Quappi's eyes seem to hint at the enigmatic "Naila" who appears sporadically in the artist's pictures (cf. *Grosses Frauenbild*, 1935, Göpel 415). Beckmann, who by his own admission regarded Quappi as an angel sent to him from above, now depicts her as a goddess, her demeanor and aspect harking back to a colourfully attired and richly

bejeweled Indian love deity. This would also explain the somewhat puzzling flowers draped across her legs – flowers often serve as the symbolic accoutrements of these beings, as do parasols, which in Quappi's case makes for a sort of halo. Beckmann was familiar with Indian iconography: He had delved into Vedic philosophy and had been impressed with Helena Blavatsky's "Secret Doctrine" of Anglo-Indian Theosophy. He felt a greater affinity for the candid tidings of Asian goddesses, it seems, than for the prudish, body-shaming moral precepts of Christianity.

Beckmann would address this same topic directly three years later, when he painted Quappi together with an Indian man (cf. *Quappi und Inder*, 1941, Göpel 587; also *Inderin*, 1943, Göpel 637). And the turbaned lady evidently wearing Indian garb in the portrait *Dame mit Spiegel* 1943 (Göpel 635) likewise could well be Quappi.

But no matter how we as viewers choose to construe the portrait *Quappi mit dem grünen Sonnenschirm*, we surely cannot deny the charm and beauty of this young lady. It holds a particularly high rank among Beckmann's portraits of women and is doubtlessly one of the finest of his Quappi portraits. The surprisingly "pristine" radiance of the extraordinary original work can be attributed to the fact that it was only ever publicly shown in two minor exhibitions in 1938 (Amsterdam) and 1968 (Schwenningen) and thus regrettably did not form part of a single one of the major Max Beckmann retrospectives.

Prof. Dr. Eugen Blume is an art historian and curator. He served as director of Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum of Contemporary Art from 2001 to 2016 and is a leading expert on Max Beckmann's oeuvre.



Quappi at the beach in Rimini, 1927



Lot 11



Max Beckmann. "Lesende Frau". 1931. Oil/canvas. Vienna, Oberes Belvedere

# 11<sup>N</sup> Max Beckmann

Leipzig 1884 – 1950 New York

“Quappi mit grünem Sonnenschirm”. 1938

Oil on canvas. 110 × 65 cm (43 ¼ × 25 ½ in.).

Signed and dated lower left: Beckmann A. 38.

Catalogue raisonné: Tiedemann/Göpel 491 (online catalogue raisonné). [3180] Frame: Spain, second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## Provenance

Studio Max Beckmann, Paris / Käthe von Porada, Paris/Vence (1938/39) / Private Collection (1965) / Private Collection, Switzerland (acquired in art trade, London)

EUR 4,000,000–6,000,000

USD 4,400,000–6,590,000

## Exhibition

Tentoonstelling van nieuwe werken door Max Beckmann. Amsterdam, Kunstzaal Van Lier, 1938 / 11. Städtische Kunstausstellung. Max Beckmann Graphik. Schwenningen, Ausstellungsräume der Berufsschule, 1968, cat. no. III

## Literature and illustration

Anonymous. In: Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, 16.6.1938 / Kasper Niehaus: Beckmann's expressionisme. Expositie bij van Lier van nieuwe werken. In: De Telegraaf (Amsterdam), 22.6.1938 / Benno Reifenberg and Wilhelm Hausenstein: Max Beckmann. Munich, R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1949, cat. no. 398 / Erhard and Barbara Göpel: Katalog der Gemälde. 2 vols. Bern, Kornfeld and Cie, 1976, here vol. I, cat. no. 491, and vol. II, ill. pl. 171 / exhibition cat.: Max Beckmann sieht Quappi ... was werde ich für schöne Portraits von Dir machen. Emden, Kunsthalle, 1999, p. 30, ill. 31 (not exhibited) / Anja Tiedemann (ed.): Max Beckmann. Die Gemälde. volume II. Ahlen (Westfalen), Kaldewei Kulturstiftung, 2021, cat. no. 491, ill.

