



“Received a magnificent painting with orchids as a gift 8 days ago! It’s the most beautiful still life that T[iger] has ever made and [is] in my favourite colours jade-green and pink.”

Quappi Beckmann, 1946

Eugen Blume Max Beckmann's Still Lives and the Play of Supernatural Powers

Like no other painter of the twentieth century, Max Beckmann breathed new life into the memento mori art of the Middle Ages and the Dutch vanitas still-life genre of the 1600s. Just like these illusionist morality pictures were filled with encrypted meaning by the plants, animals, and physical objects they showed, Beckmann's still lifes are shot through with an esoteric iconography. These symbol-laden works can be found in every one of Beckmann's creative periods and seem to inform his entire oeuvre in an almost dialogue-like fashion. Besides his portraits, rich figurative images, and landscapes, they represent his fourth major subject. Whereby all four themes are closely intertwined and frequently overlap.

In contrast to the Dutch morality paintings, which exhort viewers to make the most of their limited time on earth rather than sacrificing it to vapid pleasures, Beckmann has no didactic ambitions. His goal instead is to decode the workings of supernatural powers, to confront them with his own interpretations, and to seek access to their world "behind the curtain." The still life genre in particular reflects Beckmann's conviction that another dimension exists behind material things, one whose signs and symbols lie concealed within what we call "reality." As a painter, he considered it his task to defy these metaphysical forces. What looks to the observer's eye like a harmless, colourful still life carefully composed of everyday items was for Beckmann imbued with symbolic cues, much like an encoded visual message that uses not words but objects having double meanings. The centerpiece of this particular work is the queen of flowers: orchids, pink and white in colour, forming a bouquet with a bird-of-paradise stalk before an oval mirror. They may be Bletillas, a Japanese

variety. Generally, orchids are thought to symbolize temptation, passion, and erotic desire, which the mirror in the background seems to underscore as an intimation of seduction.

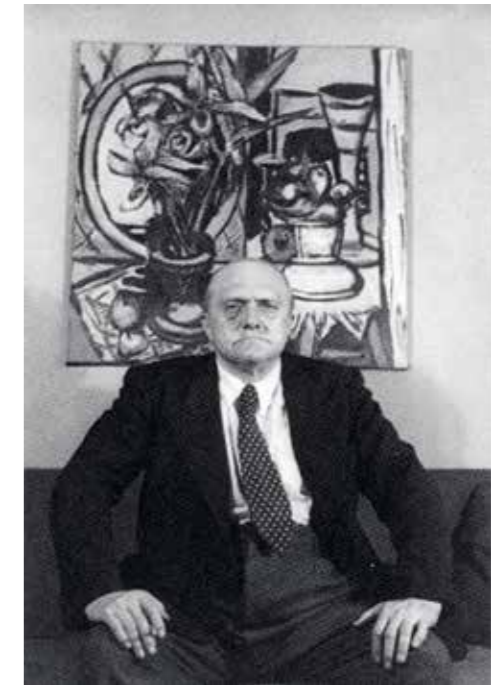
Curiously enough, the two Beckmann works on offer in our current auction, *Quappi mit dem grünen Sonnenschirm* (Lot 11) and *Stilleben mit Orchideen und Birnen*, seem to allude to each other, even though they were created some eight years apart. Their formal layout, painting style, and eye-catching green (Quappi's favorite colour) already connect them; but they also correspond thematically, since the portrait's motifs of love and sensuality seem to recur in the still life as well. Having ventured to link Quappi's aspect in her portrait from 1938 to that of Indian love deities, we can go a step further by pointing out the orchid's implied associations in Asian iconography, which include spiritual kinship, femininity, and passionate emotion. The vase holding the orchids rests on a newspaper whose vaguely implied lettering could be construed as an invitation to "read" the picture. From the 1920s onwards, we repeatedly find newspapers or sheets of music serving as seemingly random underlays for vases and other tabletop items in Beckmann's still lifes. The barely recognizable black gloves behind the flower-



Lot 21



Max Beckmann. "Quappi mit großem Stilleben". 1941. Oil/canvas. Destroyed.



Max Beckmann in front of "Stilleben mit Orchideen und Birnen". Saint Louis, 1949.

pot could well serve to express fidelity, in line with traditional convention. And the perishable fruits, pears, and apples are metaphors for worldly transience – a nod by Beckmann to the vanitas paintings of the Baroque era.

More than anything else, however, this work from 1946 testifies to Beckmann's interest in spatial configurations and in the interplay of colours. Colouration plays the decisive role in a carefully balanced arrangement of objects within the square frame. It leads our eye over the entire surface, primarily playing off red against green. The black paint with which Beckmann usually contours physical objects serves to reinforce the cohesion – we could also call it "structural resilience" – of the composition, in which spatial depth is foregone, everything is kept intentionally two-dimensional, and solely the objects are modeled in sculptural fashion. In his overall colour scheme, Beckmann dispenses with the menacingly somber tones he favoured during the Nazi occupation: Now that Holland had been liberated and the personal prospect of emigration to America beckoned, his palette became distinctly brighter. This gives the image a vibrant sense of optimism – were it not for that narrow black fissure at its center. The darkness showing itself here cautions the viewer to not forget the abyss always yawning at our feet.

The intimate message of this still life evidently was intended for Beckmann's wife Quappi. We know of only a single portrait, destroyed in World War II (*Quappi mit grossem Stilleben*, 1941, Göpel 569), in which the artist actually positioned her behind a still life arrangement, which seemed to correspond with her by way of the objects depicted.

It is definitely for a reason that Beckmann gifted the encrypted confession of his love, *Stilleben mit Orchideen und Birnen*, to his wife Quappi, who kept it in her possession for the rest of her life (see photo above).

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.

21^N Max Beckmann

Leipzig 1884 – 1950 New York

„Stilleben mit Orchideen und Birnen“. 1946

Oil on canvas. 90.5 × 90.5 cm (35 7/8 × 35 7/8 in.).

Inscribed in black felt-tip pen by Mathilde Quappi Beckmann on the reverse of the canvas: „Stilleben mit Orchideen und Birnen“ painted by Max Beckmann, Amsterdam 1946. Mathilde Quappi Beckmann, New York 1950. On the stretcher labels of Galerie Curt Valentin, New York, and of the exhibitions Boston 1957, Boston/New York 1964/65 and Hamburg/Frankfurt a. M. 1965 (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Tiedemann/Göpel 709 (online catalogue raisonné). [3180] Framed.

Provenance

Studio Max Beckmann / Mathilde Quappi Beckmann (gift of the artist) / Beckmann family / Private Collection, USA / Private Collection, Switzerland

EUR 1,000,000–1,500,000

USD 1,100,000–1,650,000

Exhibition

European Masters of Our Time. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1957, cat. no. 9, ill. / Max Beckmann. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; New York, Museum of Modern Art, and Chicago, Art Institute, 1964/65, cat. no. 63, ill. / Max Beckmann, Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen. Hamburg, Kunstverein, and Frankfurt a.M., Kunstverein, 1965, cat. no. 59, ill. / Max Beckmann, Paintings, Drawings and Graphic Work. London, Tate Gallery, 1965, cat. no. 62 / Max Beckmann. Gemälde – Aquarelle – Zeichnungen – Skulpturen aus dem Nachlass Mathilde Q. Beckmann und anderen Sammlungen. Berlin/Kampen (Sylt), Galerie Pels-Leusden, 1997

Literature and illustration

Benno Reifenberg and Wilhelm Hausenstein: Max Beckmann. Munich, R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1949, cat. no. 590 / Peter Beckmann (ed.): Max Beckmann. Sichtbares und Unsichtbares. Stuttgart, Belsler Verlag, 1965, ill. p. 103 / Peter Selz: Max Beckmann. in exh. cat.: Max Beckmann. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1964, p. 86/87, ill. / Erhard and Barbara Göpel: Katalog der Gemälde. 2 vol. Bern, Kornfeld and Cie, 1976, here vol. I, cat. no. 709, and vol. II, ill. pl. 259 / Erhard Göpel (ed.): Max Beckmann, Tagebücher 1940–1950. Munich, Piper Verlag, 1984, p. 147, 151 and 152 / Jutta Schütt, Christiane Zeiller: Time-Motion. Ein Kaleidoskop in Bildern und Worten. In: exh. cat.: Beckmann & Amerika. Frankfurt a.M., Städel Museum, 2011, p. 23–51, here p. 39, ill. (not exhibited) / Karin Schick: Die Dinge außer uns. Zu einigen Objekten in Beckmanns Stilleben. In: exh. cat. Max Beckmann. Die Stilleben. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 2014, p. 11–25, here p. 24 and 25, ill. / Simon Kelly: »Ein wunderbarer Mensch und Lehrer«. Max Beckmann als Dozent und die Bedeutung des Stillebens. In: exh. cat. Max Beckmann. Die Stilleben. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 2014, p. 66–75, here p. 69 (not exhibited) / Anja Tiedemann (ed.): Max Beckmann. Die Gemälde. Band II. Ahlen (Westfalen), Kaldewei Kulturstiftung, 2021, cat. no. 709, ill.

