

Max Beckmann : picturing himself

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Author

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Max Beckmann

Picturing Himself

Königbar (Selbstbildnis) (Queen Bar [Self-Portrait]), trial proof. 1920. Drypoint, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (31.8 x 24.8 cm). Publisher: Zingler's Kabinett, Frankfurt. Edition: 50. Gift of Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon

Selbstbildnis mit steifem Hut (Self-Portrait in Bowler Hat). 1921. Drypoint, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (32.3 x 24.8 cm). Publisher: J.B. Neumann, Berlin. Edition: approx. 50. Gift of Edward M. M. Warburg

Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait). 1922. Woodcut, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (22.1 x 15.5 cm). Publisher: Verlag R. Piper & Co., Munich. Edition: 200. Given anonymously

*As we still do not know what this Self really is . . . we must peer deeper and deeper into its discovery. For the self is the great veiled mystery of the world.**

Max Beckmann (1884–1950) depicted himself in more portraits than any other artist since Rembrandt. His more than eighty traditional self-portrait prints, drawings, and paintings became a means of expressing the artist's ongoing preoccupation with the complexity of individual identity and the human condition.

Although over the course of his career Beckmann refused to be categorized artistically, and indeed developed a visual vocabulary uniquely his own, he is often associated with a new form of Social Realism that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century, known as *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* (the New Objectivity). The artists associated with this movement, who first exhibited together in 1925, reacted against both the primal and spiri-



Self-Portrait in Bowler Hat, 1921



Queen Bar (Self-Portrait), 1920

tual concerns of earlier German Expressionism and instead represented with painstaking reality the horrors of World War I and the instability of its aftermath. Beckmann, how-

ever, unlike the more literal artists George Grosz and Otto Dix, often found expression through mythological, religious, allegorical, and theatrical imagery that could symbolize both the tragedy and comedy of humanity.

Beckmann's unusual combination of fiction and reality is also present in his self-portraits in which we see the artist in a variety of roles, disguises, and moods.

His printed oeuvre, numbering 373 works, including 33 self-portraits, is particularly insightful because Beckmann's prints, devoid of the color and large scale of his paintings, convey a more direct sense of subject and working method.

The three self-portraits illustrated here, all produced in Frankfurt after Beckmann's harrowing experience serving in the war and during his most prolific printmaking period, picture the artist in multiple identities and settings. In *Queen Bar (Self-Portrait)* (1920) Beckmann places himself in an awkward three-quarter

position amidst a tableau of bar patrons. His bulbous eyes stare blankly and his disproportionately large head emerges from a crowd whose faces and bodies are also compressed within the small square of the plate. The viewer senses the individuals' alienation within this deceptively social atmosphere in postwar Germany. The sharp and angular incised lines of the drypoint enhance the intensity and anxiety of the gathering.

In *Self-Portrait in Bowler Hat* (1921), completed a year later, Beckmann appears as a well-dressed gentleman whose frontal stance and direct gaze mesmerize the viewer. Beckmann's theatrical pose is framed on the left by his cat and cast shadow, on the right by a narrow vase and ash-tray, and on top by a stiff bowler hat. Although the space surrounding Beckmann is enclosed and foreshortened, his body emerges more assertively than in the earlier *Queen Bar* (*Self Portrait*). Instead of sensing anxiety, we now see a confident and mysterious Beckmann. The very densely cross-hatched incisions of the drypoint produce angular blocks of lines that also harmoniously unite the different elements of the composition. Linework informs the composition's forms to create one of Beckmann's most engaging self-portraits.

Self-Portrait (1922), produced the following year, is one of only nineteen woodcuts and the singular self-portrait woodcut Beckmann produced. Unlike the previous two portraits discussed, here Beckmann's head

alone fills the space of the composition. The hollow black slits that replace the artist's formerly bulbous eyes, his stern brow, and lifted chin express a new sense of power. The jagged relief of the woodcut creates lines and patches of lines that are bold and expressionistic, giving the portrait its strength. At the same time, however, the image is ambiguous: the crude markings, stark white face, and blackened eyes form a type of mask behind which the artist can retreat and perhaps hide his true emotions.



Self-Portrait, 1922

In an attempt to understand the self and the nature of man's existence, Beckmann presented his likeness through a myriad of roles and moods. As these three prints illustrate, Beckmann also employs different compositions and techniques to different expressive ends. He mixes fact and fiction, the real and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, ultimately leaving the act

of interpretation to the spectator who must also search for answers about the self.

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* Max Beckmann, *On My Painting* (New York: Bucholz Gallery, 1941), p. 10.

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