



Max Beckmann: Deposition

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Art 375

e Descent from the Cross was painted by the German artist Max Beckmann in 1917; today, its oil on a 59.5 by 50.75 inch canvas is held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. This image of Christ is not an ideal one, and strays from long-established Christian art that most people know of. The deposition has never been shown in such an appalling way as this, creating uneasy feelings for the viewer. The image of Christ is almost unrecognizable, with thin skin upon his bones, pale and yellow. The other figures in the piece are also distorted to an extent of morbidity with no sign of hope. The painting has death flowing in, out, and through it, radiating the feeling of suffering. All paintings of the descent from the cross deal with a dead Christ during a painful time, but no artist has been as vulgar as Beckmann.

Max Beckmann was never the average artist, and because of his life choices, he changed as a person, thus contributing to his style of art. How could one man use art to portray death so realistically, and why? How does this disturbing piece compare to other depositions throughout the history of art? Although his style had drastic differences that separated him from the other artists of his time, his symbolism and subject matter did not stray from the established history.

Max Beckmann was born in Germany in 1884, in the era of Impressionist painters: a time where artists began to experiment with colors, techniques, and subject matter. Although the generation around him began to search for a renewal of form, Beckman was more interested in the continuation of the tradition that he had grown up with.¹ And as many artists began experimenting and forming groups like the Blaue Reiter and Brücke painters, Beckmann stood alone in isolation.² Instead of following the trend in art, he decided to follow his own desires. What separated Beckmann's artistic expression from those groups was his "extensive but subtle use of the color black."³ While others picked "festive colors as a metaphor for joy and vitality" Beckmann strayed from the

trend by using dark colors, sharp black lines, and grim subject matter to create political statements and express a variety of emotions⁴. He used black to force objects together to create proximity, and often outlined, or "imprisoned," his graven images in black, creating compositions that looked as if they would burst from the picture plane.⁵

Beckmann hated sentimentality; thus, his desire was to record the inexpressible things in life. The stronger that desire became, the more he wanted "to seize this frightful twitching monster of vitality and to cage it in glass-clear sharp lines and surfaces, to suppress it, to throttle it."⁶

Beckmann met the greatest influence of all after the outbreak of World War I and his voluntary involvement in 1914. Beckmann was assigned to East Prussian and Belgian fronts as a medical orderly for the German Army until the spring of 1915.⁷ Initially, Beckmann thought the war would be a great opportunity for pictorial reportage on a catastrophic event.⁸ He suffered through his short tour in World War I with many losses and the death of his broken-spirited friend through suicide.⁹ Upon leaving field conditions, Beckmann was transferred to a base hospital, where he sketched his observations and the pain on each patient's face.¹⁰

After being exposed to harsh conditions, death, and the pure truth of what was involved in the war, changed Beckmann and his early style of art.¹¹ The major difference in his artwork before 1914 was that it failed to penetrate into "the souls of things."¹² He became more interested in abstracted human form and shapes that pressed against each other rather than creating a space between them. The depth in his artwork began to shrink and the figures became crowded with no room to move freely in space. In 1914, at the age of thirty, Beckmann stated in the *Kunst und Künstler* journal: "For myself, I pursue the art of space and depth with all my soul and try to achieve my own

1 Dube, Wolf Dieter. *e Expressionists*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 162

2 Roh, Franx. *German Painting in the 20th Century*. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), p.97

3 Heckmanns, Friedrich; Löffler, Fritz; Roters, Eberhard; Wiese, Stephan von. *German Expressionism 1915-1925, e Second Generation*. (Munic: Prestel-Verlag, 1988), p. 39

4 Heckmanns, Friedrich; Löffler, Fritz; Roters, Eberhard; Wiese, Stephan von. *German Expressionism 1915-1925, e Second Generation*. (Munic: Prestel-Verlag, 1988), p. 39

5 Roh, Franx. *German Painting in the 20th Century*. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), p.98

6 Excerpt from Max Beckmann's journal. Dube, Wolf Dieter. *e Expressionists*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 167

7 Buenger, Barbera C. "Max Beckmann's Ideologues: Some forgotten Faces." *e Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, no. 3, (1989), p. 453-479.

8 Selz, Peter Howard. *Max Beckmann*, Museum of Modern Art. (New York: Ayer Publishing, 1980), p. 21

9 Buenger, Barbera C. "Max Beckmann's Ideologues: Some forgotten Faces." *e Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, no. 3, (1989), p. 453-479.

10 Selz, Peter Howard. *Max Beckmann*, Museum of Modern Art. (New York: Ayer Publishing, 1980), p. 22

11 Haftmann, Werner. *German Art of the Twentieth Century*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1957), p.96

12 Dube, Wolf Dieter. *e Expressionists*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 163

style in it.”¹³

Between 1917 and 1918, Beckmann had a sudden urge to paint a series of distorted images of religious themes. He had illustrated many religiously themed pieces before but never this sinister, or to this extent. One reason he may have turned to religious work was because, after being dismissed from the Army, having a nervous breakdown, and leaving his wife and son, he was left feeling alone, traumatized, and distressed. Creating religious work may have been comforting during his time of agony as flashbacks of war overwhelmed him. Some Christian work he composed was entitled: *Adam and Eve* in 1917, *Resurrection in 1918*, and *Crucifixion*. Each image holds the same qualities that he emphatically discovered during war: sharp black lines, solemn figures projecting intense emotion, and a cold color pallet.

Beckmann was not only interested in painting, but also in dry point, a common technique that he used for his work. Dry point is an “engraving method in which the design to be printed is scratched directly into a copperplate with a sharply pointed instrument.”¹⁴ This method of art allows Beckmann to use black outlines as the basis for his work, which may have had an impact on his painting. Using this technique, Beckmann created a *Descent from the Cross* as a mirror image to the painting.¹⁵ Although the print is said to be created in 1918, a year after the painting was created, it is also located in a series called *Faces*. The print may have easily been created far before the painting and dated for the series completion, not the individual piece. The print allows for a different view of the *Descent from the Cross*, allowing the viewer to focus on the subject matter and lines without the color and highlights.

At first glance, Max Beckmann’s piece *Descent from the Cross* is hard to look at because of its raw, non-ideal proportions and abstract explanation of the figure of Christ. The expressionist style used creates a cold, and somewhat disturbing, atmosphere for what is usually thought to be sacred, passionate subject matter. The elongated, distorted figure of Christ fills the space using sharp diagonals while the rest of the image pushes together, inward and up, creating no visual depth. Max Beckmann seemed to want to capture the blunt imperfection of reality without creating any false imagery. His brushwork is very loose and painterly, with a thin coat of cold colors, but it’s still neatly composed within his common use of dark, black lines.

Max Beckmann’s *Descent from the Cross* does not have as much detail and is not as intricate as some of the early pieces, however, in keeping with tradition, Beckmann does include

a few very vital components to the representation. One very important man to Christ’s descent was Joseph of Arimathea, a Jewish judge and a secret follower of Christ.¹⁶ “Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body[:]” in Jewish tradition, a body must be taken down before sunset and buried in order to preserve the soul.¹⁷ Pontius Pilate allowed the Roman guards to release Christ’s body to Joseph for burial. In the painting, Joseph can be recognized as the older man with a beard, shown holding Christ’s upper body and lowering it from the cross. The second man commonly shown assisting with Christ’s body has been identified in the Gospel of John as Nicodemus, also an undercover disciple.¹⁸ Nicodemus is usually shown as a younger man assisting Joseph, but always carrying a lower portion of Christ’s body. In keeping with this tradition, Beckmann shows Joseph with a small white mustache and white hair carrying the Christ figure’s chest, and to the right of Joseph is the younger Nicodemus holding up Christ by his hips. The men look as if they are struggling to hold up Christ’s skinny, lifeless body.

In addition to this, there are always at least two women shown weeping near the foot of the cross. These women are identified as Christ’s mother Mary who is sometimes faint, and Mary Magdalene, usually shown caressing Christ’s feet or hand.¹⁹ If the artist chooses to fill the space with other people, the roles of the two women are exaggerated. However if there aren’t many figures in a piece it is sometimes difficult to tell the two women apart, just as in Beckmann’s *Descent from the Cross*. The painting shows two women kneeling below the cross, crying and holding hands. The woman on the left looks much older and more distressed than the other: she has one hand raised near her face with her head turned as if in agony. The woman on the right has a smaller nose and no wrinkles or bags under her eyes, indicating that she is younger and easily identifying her as Mary Magdalene. Instead of being shown caressing Christ, here Magdalene is comforting and caressing the hand of Christ’s mother, the Virgin Mary.

Commonly included in images of the descent from the cross are ladders, which were primarily used in the crucifixion. The ladder was used to put Christ up on the cross and then to take him down. Joseph and Nicodemus may have also used

13 Dube, Wolf Dieter. *Expressionists*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 161

14 Encyclopedia Britannica Online, *Dry point*, (accessed on April 3, 2009) <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172437/drypoint>

15 *The Descent from the Cross* is located in a series called *Faces*, dated 1918. *Museum of Modern Art*, The Collection: Max Beckmann, (accessed January 14, 2009), <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse>

16 Rynck, Patrick De, *How to Read a Painting: Lessons from the Old Master* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 2004) p.

17 Mark 15:43. *Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 583.

18 John 19:39 “He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus in the night.” *Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p.619

19 In the Gospels Mary Magdalene is always identified but the Virgin Mary is not identified at all. In Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James are identified, while Luke and John name no women. *Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 570, 583

it as a stretcher to carry the body of Christ to his tomb.²⁰ Through art, the role of the ladder has changed to symbolize Christ's ascent to heaven. This idea derived from the Biblical story of Jacob: "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway (or a ladder) resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."²¹ Beckmann uses the ladder to his extent by creating the deepest portion of the painting. The ladder is shown leaning against the cross, and foreshortened by the angle. This causes it to protrude beyond the picture plane and into the heavens as if it's awaiting Christ's ascent.

The most important element to a deposition is the cross. Although the cross is important because of its major role in the crucifixion, the cross has also become a major symbol for the Christian religion. The cross has become a reminder of Christ's love and sacrifice for all humanity.²² The cross also provides the center of Christian belief that Jesus Christ died for the sin of man and all those who believe in him shall be given salvation. Along with the major role of the cross, every type of cross holds another meaning. In Beckmann's *Descent from the Cross*, although the cross is hidden behind the ladder Joseph, Nicodemus, and Christ, it is still identifiable as a "tau cross." The "tau cross" has nothing extending above its arms and resembles the Greek letter "T." The "tau cross" is known as a symbol of a prophecy because "it is the traditional sign that Israelites made with lamb's blood on their doorposts in Egypt on the night of Passover."²³

Two other elements that are not commonly used in descent pieces are signs of the stigmata and the sun. However, there is a large red sun in the background of Beckmann's piece, used as a prophetic symbol for Christ.²⁴ The sun as a symbol for Christ comes from the Bible, where, in Malachi 4:2 it is written: "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings."²⁵ The stigmata symbolizes the torture that Christ endured; the markings usually include holes in his hands and feet, a crown of thorns, and a stab wound on his side. In Beckmann's piece, his Christ looks emaciated with yellowing and bruising on his skin, holes in his feet and hands, and, again, the crown of thorns upon his head.

In comparison, Rosso Fiorentino's *Descent from the Cross*²⁶

captures the same iconography and simplicity as Beckmann's piece. Both pieces have fewer figures than most and the shallow background is accentuated with the use of a ladder. Despite this, there still are very distinct differences in style between that of the Fiorentino and Beckmann works. All the figures in Fiorentino's composition have space to move around, are ideally proportioned, have clean features, and none seem to be in distress. The handling of the paint and subject matter is also quite different, as Fiorentino uses bright colors with a clean application, while Beckmann's style is, again, very loose and painterly.

Although Max Beckmann's *Descent from the Cross* holds all the same iconography as most other Christian art, it still cannot be compared equally due to its dramatic style and techniques. Most descent pieces are harmonious, showing Christ's dead body as peaceful and healthy as if he died due to a natural cause. There are only a few compositions that translate emotion, terror and pain in a similar way to Beckmann's style; many of which come from the Gothic period.

In this regard, there is a descent from the cross piece within the composition of the *Crucifix with the Stories of the Passion*, created around the year 1200.²⁷ This piece uses much brighter colors than Beckmann, but the sorrow is clear by the style of the figures. There are seven figures in this piece: Christ is centered with Joseph and Nicodemus removing his limp body from the cross, and there are two women that flank each side of the cross. The images are distorted, adding to the grief. However this piece is not as intensely twisted as Beckmann's. The women on both sides watch in sorrow, with their heads down and furrowed brows. The artist did a quality job, using distortion to display a heavy feeling of sadness and pain, but, at the same time, using bright colors to bring the piece back to life.

The *Deposition* by Lucchese in 1240, located at the Uffizi in Florence, has more similarities to Beckmann's painting style than many other pieces.²⁸ Lucchese's painting has only five figures, like Beckmann, and uses dark lines to outline the images. The painting is very shallow, and the tau style cross and one ladder create the background. The shallow space is also crowded with the few figures and they have no space to move around. Lucchese does not idealize his images and is not focused on the perfect human form: instead, emotions of sorrow and grief come through clearly. The body of Christ looks dead and heavy, as Joseph struggles to hold it up twisting as Nicodemus cuts the nails from his feet. The figures around Christ are elongated and distorted, showing their sadness, while both Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary are stretched enough to reach and touch Christ before his body is taken

20 *Science of the Bible*, dir. Micheal S.Ojeda, perf. Hayati Akabas, DVD, 2005.

21 Gen 28:12. *e Holy Bible, New International Version*. (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 17.

22 Gast, Walter E. *Symbols in Christian Art and Architecture*. (accessed March 05, 2008), <http://wegast.home.att.net/symbols/>

23 Gast, Walter E. *Symbols in Christian Art and Architecture*. (accessed March 05, 2008), <http://wegast.home.att.net/symbols/>

24 Gast, Walter E. *Symbols in Christian Art and Architecture*. (accessed March 05, 2008), <http://wegast.home.att.net/symbols/>

25 *e Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p.548

26 333 x 196cm panel, painted in 1495-1540. Rynck, Patrick De, *How to Read a Painting: Lessons from the Old Master* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 2004)

27 The painting has an unknown artist. Emil Kern, Daniel Marx, Web Gallery of Art. (accessed March 30, 2009) <http://www.wga.hu/>.

28 Meiss, Millard, *Painting in Florence and Sienna after the Black Death*. (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1951) p. 49

down. This painting shows that distortion was around before Beckmann's time, and even utilized similar techniques of crowding space and heavy black lines.

Two other pieces that resemble Beckmann's work are of crucifixions, not depictions, but still hold similar qualities in the style of art. First, is a mosaic called *Crucifixion*, from 1200-1220, this piece has heavy black lines and much sorrow caused by the distorted figures.²⁹ Secondly is the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald in 1512.³⁰ This piece is not distorted and the figures are painted naturalistically; however, the artist creates a disturbing dead Christ. His skin is yellow and looks beaten; he is very skinny and his arms are stretched and twisted to reach the cross. The feeling of looking at this image of Christ is very similar to the feeling received from Beckmann's *Descent from the Cross*.

Beckmann's work fits nicely into the Gothic era of art because, during this time, their work was all distorted in an attempt to search for the correct emotional equation. The Christian art of this time had a lot of "hard-to-look-at" pieces that brought out heavy emotions, like fear or sorrow.

Beckmann was different for his time because of his experiences in war and witnessing traumatic deaths as a medical orderly. He set himself up for creating pain in his art by using the morgue and the horrified patients as models for his work. Nothing other than in a cold composition could be expected of him. Beckmann's *Descent from the Cross* easily portrays his life experiences in a time of distress, when all he had left to turn to was his religion. In fact, Beckmann stated during the war:

"My will to live is at present stronger than ever although I have experienced great horror and have seemed to die with the others several times. But the more often one dies, the more intensely one lives. I have drawn - this is what keeps me from death and danger."³¹

All "descent from the cross" pieces deal with a dead Christ during a painful time, but no artist has ever been as vulgar as Max Beckmann. It can only be concluded that there is no way to express death and pain so accurately in art unless you have experienced it yourself.

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29 This piece is created by an unknown artist, located in the Basilica di San Marco, Venice. Emil Kern, Daniel Marx, Web Gallery of Art. (accessed March 30, 2009) <http://www.wga.hu/>.

30 Emil Kern, Daniel Marx, Web Gallery of Art. (accessed March 30, 2009) <http://www.wga.hu/>.

31 Selz, Peter Howard. *Max Beckmann*, Museum of Modern Art. (New York: Ayer Publishing, 1980), p. 21

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