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In the summer of 1938, the group exhibition *Twentieth Century German Art* opened at the New Burlington Galleries in London. Under the working title *Banned Art*, it had been planned by both British and German-emigrant organizers to counter the National Socialist propaganda exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), which had opened the previous year and had vilified nearly all German contemporary art. Although the project's aggressively political orientation was toned down in the course of preparations, it remained obvious to visitors and journalists, a number of whom reported on the exhibition. Any direct reference to National Socialist cultural policy was avoided in the announcements and in the catalog, yet the expressly formulated objective of the exhibition remained one of offering artists who had fled Germany a platform to present their art and to build up a new network. For many of the participating artists, it was the first presentation of their works in Britain at all. That was also true of Max Beckmann, who a year earlier, on the day of Adolf Hitler's speech at the opening of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) in Munich, had emigrated to Amsterdam. His exile was preceded by considerable repressive measures, which had been increasing from year to year since the National Socialists seized power in 1933, making it impossible for Beckmann to work in Germany.

Beckmann was initially skeptical about participating in the protest exhibition. In a letter dated January 29, 1938, he told his friend and supporter Stephan Lackner, an art historian and author who had emigrated to Paris, that he wanted to express himself through his painting and not with political agitation. "True art cannot have an effect by means of the noise and agitation in the journalistic sense."[1] In the end, Lackner and the organizers were able to persuade him that his position had to be represented. Beckmann's participation in the London exhibition—with six paintings, including his triptych *Temptation* (1936, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, fig. 1), which became the main work of the exhibition, and the lithograph *Tamerlan* (cat. 72)[2]—represented a turning point in his art's reception. This change in the perception of his painting is indebted to Lackner's introductory essay "Das Welttheater des Malers Beckmann," which he had written at the artist's suggestion and was available in the exhibition in an English translation.[3] For the first time, the author connected Beckmann's art to the idea of the theater of the world and presented the artist to the British public "as a showman inviting us to witness a panorama of human life."[4] Beckmann, "[t]he author, who is also the manager, producer and scene-shifter, gets into costume from time to time and gives the actors a helping hand."[5] His paintings are said to be like plays whose "plot […] can be summed up as the emergence of mythical fables of mankind from the garish background of present-day existence."[6] With its characterization of Beckmann as a painting "manager, producer, and scene-shifter," Lackner's text influenced one crucial reading of the artist's work.[7] Even today, the topos of the theater of the world is used in the literature on Beckmann, often without question of the concept as such and the historical context in which it was first applied to the painter.[8] The present essay begins by outlining the intellectual history of the theater of the world concept, and then explores how the metaphor of the theater of the world appears in Beckmann's art. We will also take into account the political backdrop against which Lackner associated the term with Beckmann. For Lackner used the term "theater of the world" in 1938, hence in a period of an all-encompassing destablization and threatening of German cultural scene, which affected not only Lackner but also his friend, the artist.[9]

The Theater of the World: The Intellectual History

The idea of the theater of the world, which dates back to antiquity, is still alive in everyday language and common spaces. It describes the world as a stage, upon which all human action is presented as a play.[10] The theater of the world consists of five components: the author, the director, the plot, and actors, and the audience. Whereas either God or humanity can be seen as the author of the theater of the world, the director is also seen to be God or fate. The action can mean the general course of the world, human action, or reality, which of course turns out to be an illusion. Human beings are the actors in the theater of the world. The audience is played either by God, or, again, humanity.

1 *Twentieth-Century German Art* exhibition, 1938
New Burlington Galleries, London,
installation view with Max Beckmann's triptych
Temptation

The Theater of the World in the Early Modern Period

Historically speaking, the early modern period is regarded as a pivotal era on the way to modernism. In the human perception of time, this is when history's temporality began to play a role, a development culminating in the acceleration that characterizes our modern times.[10] Once the story of salvation as the ordering principle of the middle ages was robbed of its potency, our view of the world could become a topic for historiography, and a historical consciousness could arise.[11] The signature trait of the baroque era is an aesthetically extremely productive tension between a hope for salvation based on a belief in an afterlife versus a staunch affirmation of the here and now, as manifested in an immense enjoyment of festivities and play.[12] This earthly delight in playing can be felt in such contrary works as those of Shakespeare and Calderón. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601–02) displays a focus on the present moment that still fascinates us today, connected with the idea of life as play-acting. Already in the first act, Hamlet expresses the intention "to put an antic disposition on."[13] He deliberately uses drama to get at the truth—the murder of his father: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."[14] Play-acting is thus not written off as mere superficial appearance, as "only" a play, but is instead where the truth behind appearances is exposed.

In the comedy *As You Like It* (1598–1600), it is the character of Jacques who philosophizes on the state of the world, starting with the famous observation "All the world is a stage." He continues: "And all the men and women merely players / They have their exits and their entrances / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages."[15] For all its orientation on the here and now, this passage nonetheless betrays Shakespeare's basically Elizabethan view of the world. Given the orientation on human action and the very finely differentiated motivations behind it, including on the psychological level, we can speak here of Shakespeare's theatrical metaphors as rooted primarily in the idea of world immanence.

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's Corpus Christi play *The Great Theater of the World* dramatizes the world in quite a different way. In Calderón's *theatrum mundi*, heaven and earth are copresent, with the "author" (equated with God) placed upstage of the action. The allegorical figure of the "World" assigns roles according to this Author's instructions. We will see the other prototypical allegorical figures found here again, for example in the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal: the King, the Wise Man, the Beauty, the Rich Man, the Country Man, the Beggar, a Child, a Voice. Not everyone wholeheartedly accepts his or her predetermined role. In response to the Beggar's laments, the author explains: "You see, every role can be a winner here, / For all of human life's a play / And what matters is how well you act it." Once "the curtain falls," the Beggar, too, will be equal to the others.[16] The play ends with the dramatization of an all-around reconciliation during a celebration of the Eucharist on the celestial stage.

A worldview is brought to the stage here that posits the meaning of the world drama as lying outside of history. In the contemporary context, however, the play also signifies that a worldview oriented on the hereafter needs to be affirmed. The reality of the liturgically inspired performance spectacle, whose text the audience was presumably largely unable to understand, is of central importance.[17] Hugo von Hofmannsthal not only utilized Joseph von Eichendorff's German translation of Calderón's drama, but also put a similar emphasis on performance.

The Great World Theater of Salzburg

Only four years after the end of World War I, Hofmannsthal boldly drew upon Calderón's Corpus Christi play to stage a premiere of his own *Great World Theater of Salzburg* during the Salzburg Festival under director Max Reinhardt—much to the outrage of many of his contemporaries. And as if that were not insult enough, the 1922 premiere took place in the liturgical setting of Salzburg's Collegiate Church. Hofmannsthal reaped the most biting criticism from Karl Kraus, who wrote in an article titled "On the Great World Theater Hoax" that the author was apparently

1 **Production of the play**
The Great World Theater of Salzburg
by Hugo von Hofmannsthal on
the Salzburg Festival stage, 1925

2 **Actor Alexander Moissi**
as the Beggar in the play
The Great World Theater of Salzburg
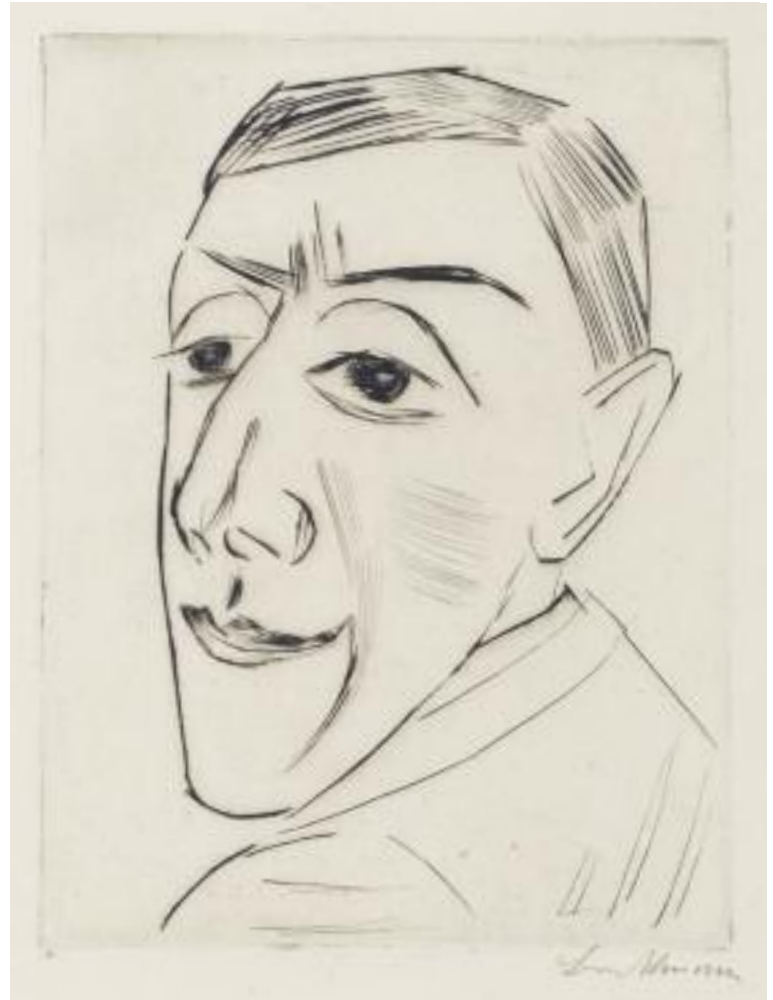**by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 1922**

3 **Production of the play**
The Great World Theater of Salzburg
by Hugo von Hofmannsthal
on the Salzburg Festival stage, 1925

2　*Family Picture*, 1920
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1935

23 *Portrait of the Actor*
N. M. Zeretelli, ca. 1924
Kunsthalle Bremen –
Der Kunstverein in Bremen

31 *Actors: Triptych*, 1941–42
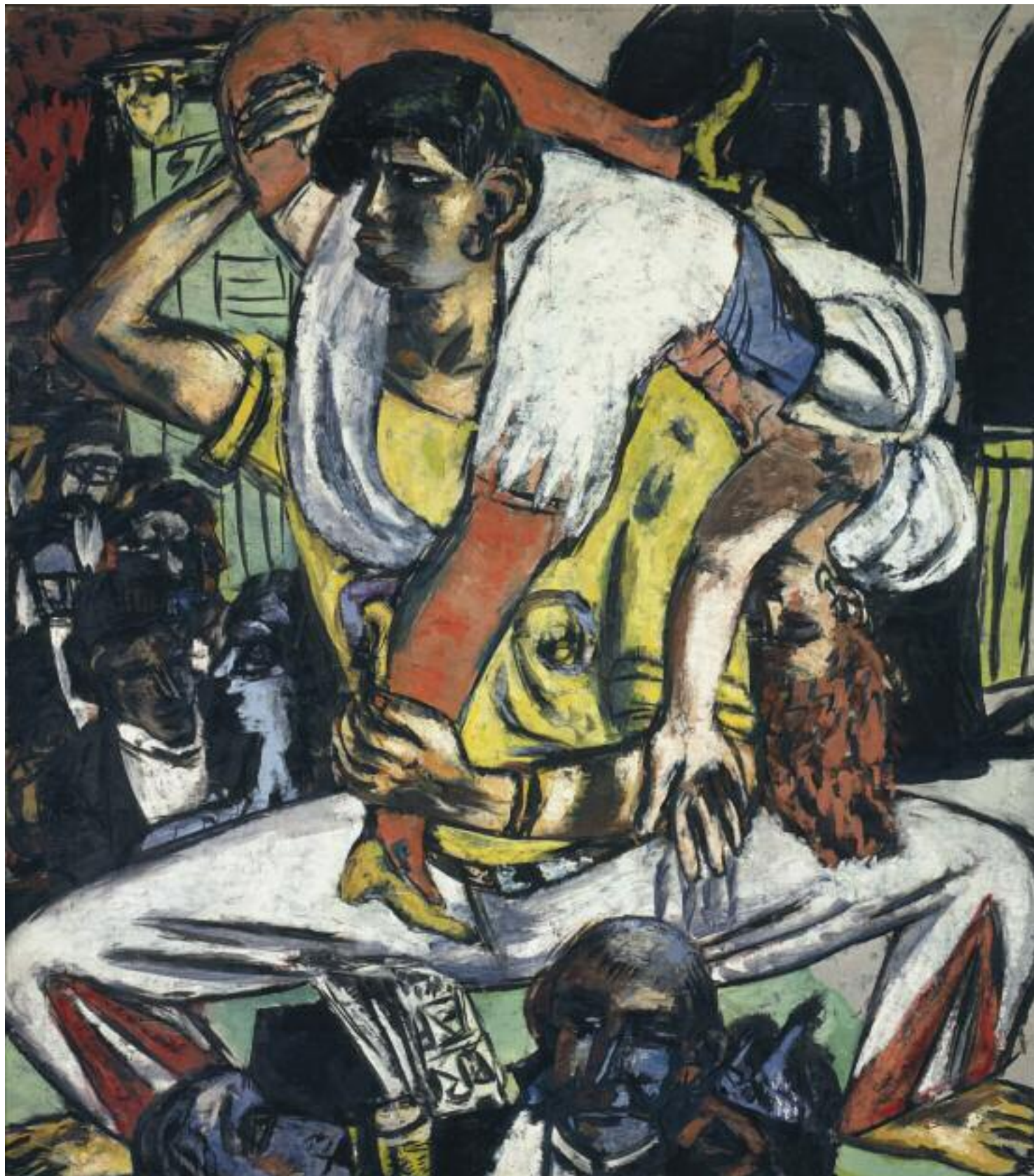Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA
Gift of Lois Orswell

39 *Seated Couple*, 1938
Private collection, Berlin

40 *Apache Dance*, 1938
Kunsthalle Bremen –
Der Kunstverein in Bremen

55 *Female Dancer (Doing the Splits)*, **1935
Museum der bildenden
Künste Leipzig
On permanent loan from
the Estate of Mathilde Q.
Beckmann**

59 *Variety Show*, **1927**
Collection of Richard L. Feigen,
New York

60 *Theater*
Plate 8 of *Faces*, 1916
Kunsthalle Bremen –
Der Kunstverein in Bremen

Audience: The Role of the Spectator

Verena Borgmann

As an artist, Beckmann was both the creator and the director of his pictorial world. Like all other participants in the "theater of the world," however, he could also switch into the role of the spectator. The time Beckmann spent quietly observing the action going on around him in bars, theaters, circuses, or variety shows was vitally important to him, also during the war years. He interpreted the auditorium as a haven for viewers—a refuge from the problems of the outside world—but also employed it as a metaphor for social isolation. For Beckmann, maintaining a detached perspective was crucial in capturing and commenting on (world) events in his art.

Stage model by Traugott Müller for Ernst Toller's play *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, directed by Erwin Piscator at the Theater am Nollendorfplatz, Berlin, 1927
Theater History Collections of the Institute for Theater Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin
Photograph: Hans Böhm

Traugott Müller and Erwin Piscator designed a monumental theater stage with different sections that could be used simultaneously; the multistory structure was mounted on rails and had transparent walls. Film projections and radio clips were used to interrupt the flow of action, but also to communicate between the various scenes and levels. In this way, the experience of simultaneous actions, which had become quite normal for many city dwellers since the end of the nineteenth century as a result of developments in transportation, the media, and industrial production, was brought onto the theater stage. The literary text was confronted with documentary theater, creating a challenging perceptual situation for viewers. All of these elements—the simultaneous enactment of different story lines within a confined space, the division of the pictorial or theatrical space into three parts, the nonlinear narrative structure, and the active role played by the audience—can be related to the underlying concept of Beckmann's triptychs (cat. 31, 34, 83, 84, pp. 69 and 73)

Production photo from *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, 1927
Theater History Collections of the Institute for Theater Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin

In September 1941 and again in May/June 1942, Beckmann spent a few days in the Dutch town of Valkenburg. While he was there, he visited the Gemeentegrot (municipal caves), which then housed a facility that belonged to the champagne company Heidsieck. When Beckmann entered this space, which was not open to the public, he found a surprising scene: Approximately four-meter-high replicas of champagne bottles were installed here alongside built-in walls with a relief and a fountain. Beckmann drew inspiration from this interior for his painting *Apollo* (cat. 28)

Postcard of the Gemeentegrot Valkenburg, from the estate of Max Beckmann, ca. 1941–42
Max Beckmann Archiv, Max Beckmann Nachlässe, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich

Poster advertising a guest
production in Paris
by the Kamerny Theater
from Moscow, 1923

The actor Heinrich George
in the title role of Friedrich
Schiller's *Wallenstein*, 1935
Foto-Nachlass Heinrich
George (Heinrich George
Photo Estate), Berlin

**Max Beckmann saw
Heinrich George perform-
ing in Richard Weichert's
production of *Wallenstein*
at the Theater des Volkes
(formerly the Grosses
Schauspielhaus) in Berlin,
where the actor wore the
historical costume shown
above. Beckmann used the
same shade of vermilion
for the actor's everyday
shirt in *Family Portrait
George* (cat. 27). George's
moving performance in
this play is thought to have
inspired Beckmann to
create the group portrait.**

Nikolai Mikhailovich
Tseretelli as Hippolyte in
Jean Racine's *Phèdre*, n.d.

**Alexander Tairov was a
theater reformer in the
first half of the twentieth
century. He sought to
free theater from the
"shackles of literature"
and rejected the psycho-
logical naturalism of
Konstantin Sergeyevich
Stanislavski. In 1914, Tairov
founded the Kamerny
Theater in Moscow, which
also presented guest
productions in Frankfurt
am Main in the early
1920s. Zeretelli was one of
the main actors in this
troupe, and Beckmann
produced several portraits
of him (cat. 23, 24)**

**Having originally trained as
a painter, Max Beckmann's
first wife, Minna, embarked
on a singing career; until
the mid-1920s she enjoyed
particular success in the
operas of Richard Wagner,
performing in cities includ-
ing Dessau and Graz.
One of the roles she played
was that of Brunnhilde,
the leader of the nine
Valkyries. Following her
divorce from Beckmann
in 1925, Minna gave no
further stage perform-
ances (cat. 29)**

Minna Beckmann-Tube
in the role of Brunnhilde
in Richard Wagner's
The Valkyrie, 1919
Max Beckmann Archiv,
Max Beckmann Nachlässe,
Bayerische Staatsgemälde-
sammlungen, Munich