



BEFORE THE FALL
GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN ART OF THE 1930s

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NEW YORK



2. **FRANZ RADZIWILL** Bridgehead of the Old Dike Feeder in Dangast, ca. 1928–29



3. FRANZ RADZIWILL Hills of Düppel, 1936



11. HANS ADOLF BÜHLER The Wild Forest, ca. 1937



12. **RUDOLF SCHLICHTER** Devil in the Forest, ca. 1933



16. **FRANZ SEDLACEK** The Pass Road (Mountain Landscape with Automobile), 1931



17. **FRANZ SEDLACEK** Landscape with Rainbow, 1930

RICHARD OELZE

* JUNE 29, 1900, MAGDEBURG

† NOVEMBER 26, 1980, GUT POSTEHOLZ

1. Richard Oelze,
Daily Torments,
1934, oil on canvas.
Kunstsammlung
Nordrhein-
Westfalen, K20,
Düsseldorf



In *Erwartung* (Expectation) of 1935–36 and *Tägliche Drangsale* (Daily Torments) of 1934, Richard Oelze produced two masterpieces of Surrealism. *Erwartung* shows a group waiting for something unspecified in front of a gloomy landscape in stormy lighting. Here Oelze was drawing from Rembrandt's landscapes—Oelze's contemporary Franz Radziwill also assimilated Dutch painting of the seventeenth century in his own works [see Plates 1 and 4]—and the subtle landscape also combines influences from contemporary photography. The result shows an anonymous mass formed by a grayish mass of figures, which can be extended in the imagination to be an infinite chain moving past the viewer. Oelze achieves this by positioning black derby hats at front right and at the end of the group on the left. The resulting grouping can be extended to the right into the space of the viewers, thus integrating them into the crowd as well. The schematic depiction of

the larval figures contrasts with the seemingly mannered drawing of the vegetation, which grows eerily but also looks petrified or skeletonized in places. This makes the crowd seem stranded beneath the uncannily threatening sky. Alfred H. Barr Jr. immediately recognized the importance of the painting and purchased it for The Museum of Modern Art in 1940.

Barr had previously seen Oelze's works in Paris, when preparing for his important "Dada and Surrealism" exhibition in New York (1936). Having been introduced to him by Paul Éluard, Barr also met Oelze on that occasion, who was cautious, even reserved, and scarcely deigned to answer the MoMA director's questions. Barr spontaneously purchased the drawing *Frieda* of 1936 [see Plate 23]—which depicts a character from Franz Kafka's novel *Das Schloss* (translated as *The Castle*)—and borrowed *Tägliche Drangsale* [Fig. 1], about which the other Surrealists had been enthusiastic, for the exhibition. Gala Dalí kissed both the painter's cheeks, which led to his acceptance into the illustrious circle around Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst. Barr, by contrast, found the work almost unbearably morbid—he did not acquire it because of its gloomy eeriness—and at the same time compared it to Matthias Grünewald's magnum opus, the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–16). For him, both painters transcended the terror and sublimated it in the work of art. In Oelze's case, the horror results from amorphous formal structures, which sometimes look like skinless, shredded clumps of flesh or accumulations of hair or fur, like bleached coral or bones. The fleshy folds have clearly sexual connotations and at the same time oscillate with physiological observations of nature like those of the Romantics.

Olaf Peters



25. RICHARD OELZE Expectation, 1935-36



27. HANS SCHÖPFLIN Old Rhine Motive (Summer Day), 1929



28. MAX ERNST The Nymph Echo, Paris, 1936



38. WILHELM TRAEGER Street Scene, 1932



39. **WILHELM TRAEGER** Newspaper Seller, 1932



51. OTTO DIX Portrait of a Blonde Girl, 1932



52. OTTO DIX Mother and Eva, 1935

JOSEF SCHARL

* DECEMBER 9, 1896, MUNICH

† DECEMBER 6, 1954, NEW YORK CITY



Josef Scharl, *Reaping of the Door: Potato Harvest*, 1931, oil on canvas. Destroyed in a fire.

After World War I, Munich had lost its status as a major artistic center of the German Reich and had been surpassed by Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Hanover, and Cologne. Moreover, a decidedly reactionary political stance of much of its population ensured a rather narrow-minded world of ideas and enabled the growth of the National Socialist Party, which declared Munich the “capital of the movement.” Josef Scharl was one of the finest important painters in Munich during the interwar period. After working out his own style, Scharl was certainly an outsider of the artistic field but he was very preoccupied with modern life in a big city and with the working-class milieu. Starting out from the work of Vincent van Gogh and developing that impasto painting style, Scharl produced such moving works as *Spielende Kinder* (Playing Children) of 1927, *Mann in der Ecke* (Man in the Corner) of 1930, *Brot essender Knabe* (Bettlermahlzeit) (Boy Eating Bread [Beggar’s Mealtime]) of 1931, or his large-format magnum opus, *Armenlese, Kartoffelernte* (Reaping of the Poor: Potato Harvest) of

1931 [Fig. 1], whose dimensions clearly indicate it was intended as a major work. Because the original was destroyed when the Glaspalast (Glass Palace) in Munich burned in 1931, Scharl prepared a second version that same year.

One central theme for Scharl was the military. The painting *Gefallener Soldat* (Fallen Soldier) of 1932 is an important example; it was produced during a serious internal crisis in the Weimar Republic when the National Socialists were rising and nationalism was growing stronger. The contorted figure of the dead man is surrounded by barbed wire, making him a visual symbol of martyrdom. The painting is a memory of World War I and at the same time a warning to prevent future wars. By contrast, *Triumphzug* (Victory Parade), from the same year, is a parade that recalls the Belgian Symbolist James Ensor, with its bellowing, ghostly monstrous, and misshapen figures, whose eyes are literally darkened, nailed shut, or blinded. The group moves unwaveringly toward its future mishap. *Uniform* of 1931 [see Plate 59], which can seem like a contemporaneous caricature of the equally ornamental and decorative Berlin paintings of Marsden Hartley from around 1914–15, is a variation on the motif of blindness that looks at both the status of the soldier as victim and the emptiness of human existence covered by military decorations, “perhaps simply because the man who wears the uniform is content to feel that he is fulfilling the most essential function of his age and therefore guaranteeing the security of his own life.”¹

Olaf Peters

1 Hermann Broch, “The Romantic,” part one of *The Sleepwalkers*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Pantheon, 1947), 7–158, esp. 20.



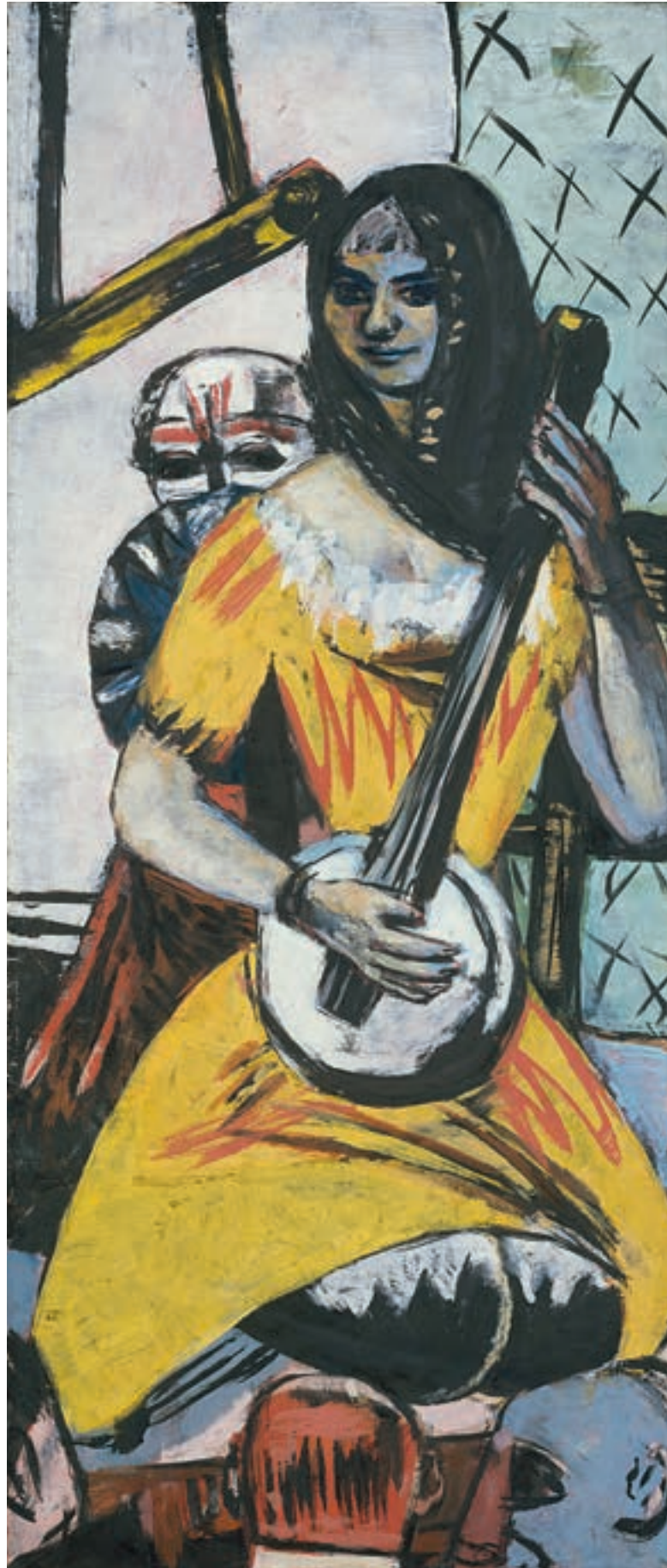
60. JOSEF SCHARL Gala-Uniform, 1935



65. FELIX NUSSBAUM Self-Portrait in the Camp, 1940



66. MAX BECKMANN Sunrise, 1929



67. **MAX BECKMANN** Vaudeville Act (Quappi), 1934 and 1937



72. **RUDOLF WACKER** Autumn Bouquet with (Pinned) Butterfly, 1938



73. KARL VÖLKER Autumnal Still-Life, 1934



76. **RUDOLF WACKER** Sheep and Doll, 1934



77. **RUDOLF WACKER** Japanese Doll and Poppy, 1934



82. WILHELM TRAEGER Still-Life with Bottles, 1931



83. WILHELM TRAEGER Still-Life with Radio, 1931



87. ERWIN BLUMENFELD Hitler, 1932



88. RUDOLF DISCHINGER Striding, 1935-36