

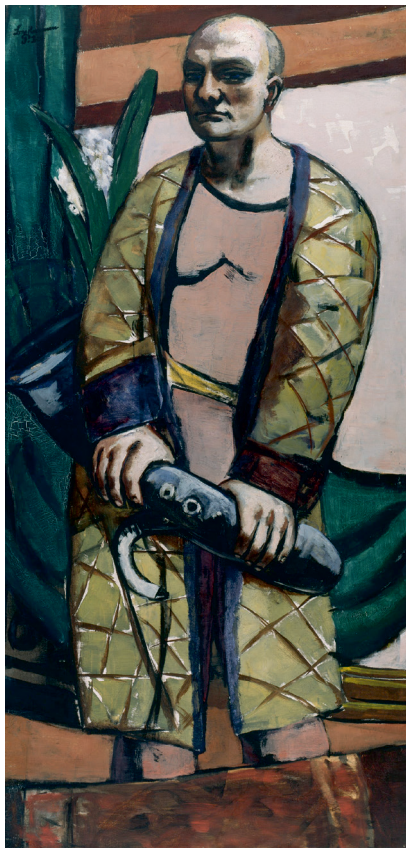
Anja Tiedemann A Final Diminuendo in Frankfurt: A Musical Painting as a Biographical Record

In *Orchester* (MB-G 367), Max Beckmann arranged resonant colours in a harmony so luxuriant as to create an image suggestive of vibrant sonority. A duo of musical instruments is set off against an abandoned orchestra pit. The highly stylized wind instrument features an evident kinship with the one in Beckmann's *Selbst-*

bildnis mit Saxophon (MB-G 320, Fig.). The stringed contraption facing it, with its rounded soundbox reminding us of a banjo or mandolin, seems to have a neck closer to a violin's. This instrument already appeared in an earlier painting, *Siesta* (MB-G 353, shown on the following page), an intimate double portrait of Beckmann and his wife. Now paired up in *Orchester*, the two instruments seem to "lean towards each other like living beings [...] as though they were forming a couple."¹ They are waiting for their cue, flanked by curtains and stage decorations that are already swinging in rhythm. Could this be a hidden declaration of love by the artist for his wife Mathilde, known as "Quappi"?

Orchester was the last picture that Max Beckmann was to paint in Frankfurt am Main and record in his list of paintings before relocating to Berlin. He would later supplement the laconic entry "Nov. Frankfurt" with the addendum "Frau Dr. Levi – New York", a reference to the work's owner.² It had been commissioned as a gift for Martha Levi by her husband Ernst, a Frankfurt lawyer.³ Beckmann had a personal connection to the Levis. Ernst Levi was an art collector who was distantly related to the Morgenroth family. Ernst Morgenroth, who later changed his name to Stephan Lackner and eventually would become one of Beckmann's greatest patrons and collectors, had met the painter at the Levis' home while still a student. And when Lackner purchased his first Beckmann painting, *Adam*

und Eva (MB-G 363) from 1932, it was Ernst Levi who arranged the deal and transmitted the good news to Beckmann in a letter. Martha Levi (née Heiden-Heimer) was a prominent personage in her own right: Trained as a concert violinist, she



Max Beckmann. "Selbstbildnis mit Saxophon". 1930.
Oil on canvas. Kunsthalle Bremen



Lot 36

was known far beyond Frankfurt as a patron of music.⁴

Commissions such as this were a godsend at the time, since Beckmann and his wife had not been left unscathed by the global economic crisis of the early 1930s. Quite possibly, the painter already was working on *Orchester* in October of 1932, when Quappi wrote to her sister in the Netherlands about the couple's need "to have a simpler standard of living and to move into the studio. Times are absolutely bad, with no great prospect of improvement at the moment; what's more, Neumann and Franke have stopped making payments altogether."⁵ They had to save money because "if we continue to live [...] on the previous basis, we'll be unable to sustain ourselves."⁶ As the prospect of having to sell off valuables loomed, *Quappi* even considered parting with her beloved violin: Its estimated market value of 50,000 Reichsmark would have contributed to maintaining the couple's lifestyle.⁷ Today, we know that no sale was ever made, but her willingness to do so may well have evoked her husband's genuine admiration and perhaps even heartfelt gratitude.

Despite having to endure such dire financial straits through no fault of his own, Max Beckmann in fact was at the apex of his career as an artist. In Berlin, Ludwig Justi had established the first international museum for contemporary art at the city's National Gallery. Here, in the Kronprinzenpalais on Unter den Linden, once a residence for a Crown Prince of Prussia, he exhibited the finest, most comprehensive collection of contemporary art to be found anywhere. In creating such a globally unique, permanent showcase for modern works, Justi provided a model that is still followed by contemporary art museums to this day. And now an entire room of this illustrious venue was to be dedicated to Max Beckmann! "I am very pleased," the artist wrote to the museum's director on 29th January 1933,

“that now, I also have the honour of my works being shown in your gallery. From your description and also from what Baron Simolin wrote me [,] I believe I can tell you already now that I am extremely satisfied and entirely in agreement. After all, I know the space and also believe that the selection is completely appropriate at the moment, as is the arrangement, which is most agreeable to me.”⁸

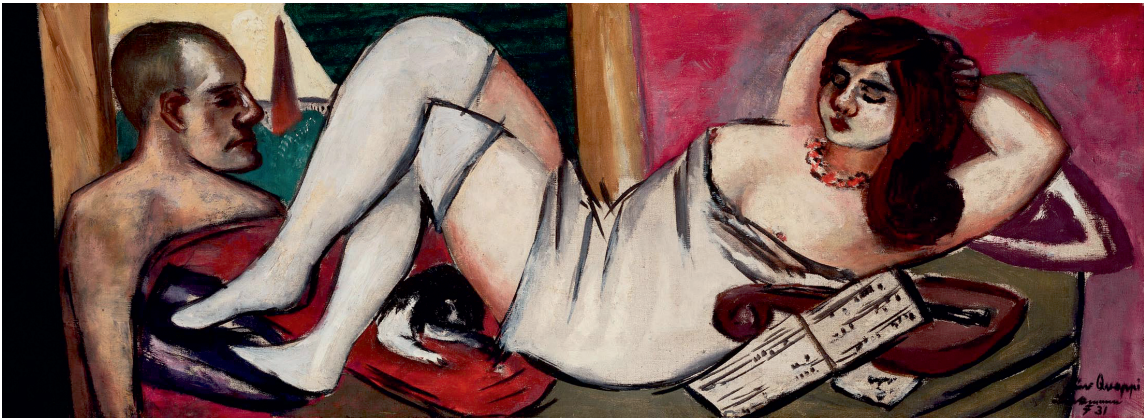
When the exhibition opened on 15th February 1933, no fewer than ten Beckmann paintings were on display on the upper floor of the building (Fig.), among them major works such as *Die Barke* (MB-G 253) and *Selbstbildnis im Smoking* (MB-G 254) as well as *Orchester*, which the painter had just finished and which found itself in the very best of company. It was likely at the painter's request that *Orchester* was exhibited in the Kronprinzenpalais instead of going directly to Ernst and Martha Levi. That said, the Frankfurt couple likely will have enjoyed seeing their painting showcased in this way. And they did not have to wait long: After just six months, the Beckmann Hall was shuttered in the wake of fierce racial-nationalistic criticism from the Nazis. Though it is no longer possible to determine when exactly the Levis took possession of the work, we do know that they took it with them upon emigrating to New York in 1940.



Max Beckmann room at the National Gallery in the former Kronprinzenpalais, Berlin. 1932/33



Max and Quappi were already living in Berlin when the Beckmann Hall closed its doors. The artist had lost his job at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and wanted to drop out of sight entirely given the political climate in the capital. His wife was willing to go along without complaint, as she confided to her sister Hedda on 12th May 1933: “Because ultimately, it makes no difference where I have Max [...]; I can be happy with him anywhere; everything else is sentimental memories, somehow [...] – not everything's easy these days – but good times will come again.” This was her way of reciprocating the declaration of love her husband had staged in *Orchestra*.⁹



Max Beckmann. "Siesta". 1931. Oil on canvas. Private collection

¹ Siegfried Gohr: Max Beckmann. Motive. Einladung zur Werkbetrachtung. Cologne, 2019, p. 24. ² Entry in the List of Paintings, Booklet 1, p. 15, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Beckmann Estate. ³ Cf. Klaus Gallwitz, Uwe M. Schneede, Stephan von Wiese (editors): Max Beckmann. Briefe, vol. 2, Commentary on Letter No. 609, p. 428, as well as <https://www.omas-gegenrechts-mainz.de/aktivitaeten/projekt-unbeugsam/martha-heiden-heimer> [last accessed on 23rd March 2025]. ⁴ Cf. [https://kuenste-im-exil.de/KIE/Content/DE/Sonderausstellungen/MaxBeckmann/Objekte/01ZeitVor Exil/beckmann-brief-levi.html?single=1](https://kuenste-im-exil.de/KIE/Content/DE/Sonderausstellungen/MaxBeckmann/Objekte/01ZeitVor%20Exil/beckmann-brief-levi.html?single=1) [last accessed on 23rd March 2025]. ⁵ Letter from Mathilde Q. Beckmann to Hedda Schoonderbeek, 11th October 1932, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Beckmann Estate. ⁶ Cf. *ibid.* ⁷ Cf. Letter from Mathilde Q. Beckmann to Hedda Schoonderbeek, XXX, *ibid.* ⁸ Cf. Klaus Gallwitz, Uwe M. Schneede, Stephan von Wiese (editors): Max Beckmann. Briefe, vol. 2, Letter No. 612, pp. 231–232. ⁹ Letter from Mathilde Q. Beckmann to Hedda Schoonderbeek, 12th May 1933, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Beckmann Estate.