

Siegfried Gohr **An Imagined Theater of Things:
Max Beckmann's Studio as a Place of Reflection**



Stilleben mit Skulptur is mentioned in Max Beckmann's diary entry for Monday, 27th April 1942: "Still working on 'Regenbogen' and on the two sculptures by the studio window", whereby the title "Rainbow" refers to a landscape painting (WVZ 600, privately owned). Looking at our painting, we see two sculptures positioned before a brightly illuminated window: a dark human head on a table on the left and a yellow horse's head on a stool on the right. Their component materials are not easily determinable. While the human head with the earrings could be made of bronze or black-tinted plaster, the horse's head might be a taxidermic specimen or animal trophy. On the other hand, it could also be a sculpture, painted yellow. The artist assigned an attribute to each work: A sheet of music to the young man's head, a vase with variously colored tulips to the head of the horse. Beckmann moved these objects to the fore of the picture, so that they seem to obtrude upon the viewer rather than living a still life.

The view out of the studio window at the back is partitioned into sections by jambs that form a strict vertical contrast to the lively arrangement on the table and stool. Though no viewer would expect inanimate objects to spring to life, it is easy to imagine overhearing a conversation between them – which does not seem to get underway without some hesitation, however, given the absent mien of the young man. The horse's head, meanwhile, its expression strangely human, approaches the dusky sculpture's hair and ear almost tenderly from the side. The yellow-red blossoms of the tulips positioned in front of the animal head also lean in towards the human one.

Taking in the painting as a whole, the viewer might find the composition puzzling: While the contrast between dark on the left and light on the right is indeed appealing, iconographic clarity remains elusive.

Perhaps a look into Beckmann's studio in 1942 can provide helpful insights. Other works were also in progress at the time, *Der Traum von Monte Carlo* and the triptych *Schauspieler* being outstanding examples. According to his diary entries, Beckmann worked periodically on the triptych's sections from 1941 onwards. His efforts intensified in 1942, and by April of that year, he was busy with *Stilleben mit Skulptur* as well. Indeed, the goings-on in the triptych seem to share a sense of theatrical staging with the still life – the two heads look like props from an imaginary play. The still life's juxtaposition of man and animal can be seen as a shorthand allusion to the dichotomy of nature, a favored theme Beckmann was also wont to depict by examining how men and women contrast and clash despite their mutual attraction. Although encapsulated in the two sculptures, these competing energies appear to radiate outward in a mysterious way. The atelier is the space suited for dealing with this tricky subject, where Beckmann could work in a relaxed, seemingly effortless manner. He often incorporated painted sculptu-

res into his compositions during the 1940s. As is the case for the right-hand panel of the *Schauspieler* triptych, where a Janus-faced bust – with facial features known from Antiquity facing left and Beckmann's (?) own profile on the right – stands on a pedestal.



Max Beckmann. "Doppelbildnis Karneval, Max Beckmann und Quappi". 1925. Oil on canvas. Kunstpalast Düsseldorf

painting yellow? This is impossible to clear up. We could draw one more parallel to the horse's head, albeit a distant one: In 1925, the year of his marriage to Mathilde Q. Beckmann, the artist painted a double portrait entitled *Doppelbildnis Karneval* (Fig.), in which Quappi can be seen on the left "riding" a dummy horse. That the animal is assigned to the woman is in keeping with Beckmann's life-long motivic preoccupation with the relationship between the sexes. Beckmann's incorporation of painted sculptures into his images harks back to a tradition from the

Beckmann began painting sculptures in 1936, the first one being a self-portrait bust, created that same year, which he integrated into a still life. The sculptures he included in his paintings can be divided into two categories: Those he had actually created and those that were imaginary. Beckmann modeled eight sculptural works in all, beginning with *Mann im Dunkeln* from 1934. Particularly impressive for its massive heft is the bust *Selbstbildnis* from 1936. But there were imagined sculptures as well, whose underlying inspirations are rarely identifiable, such as the two the artist placed before his studio window in our 1942 painting. We could perhaps relate the black human head to the self-portrait of 1936 in terms of their shared dark color and monumental aura, but this is not really compelling. It does bear noting, however, that in the painting, the portrait bust has been transformed into a sort of head trophy, i.e. an object from some other, foreign culture.

Shortly after *Stilleben mit Skulptur*, Beckmann began working on the triptych *Karneval*. Here, too, we find a black male bust, a stage prop, in the left panel. There are parallels for the horse's head, whereby the yellow coloring certainly was not based on a natural model (only Franz Marc painted yellow horses, after all!) Could it be a stuffed and prepared skull or is it a plaster head



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15th century, particularly to masters of early Netherlandish painting like Jan van Eyck. At the time, painters and sculptors alike were vying for the public's favour, and creating deceptively real-looking sculptures allowed painters to outshine the hammer-and-chisel work of their rivals. But this sense of competition from the past was no longer the main issue by the time Beckmann created his own painted sculptures. It was possible to use them as quotations from another context, a perfect example being the antique-looking heads often found in Picasso's works. Beckmann, too, used sculptures in his paintings to suggest broader horizons of meaning in a condensed way.

This explains why a black-coloured woman's head appears in the midst of a magnificent still life from 1949 (Göpel 797). This pensively melancholy face provides a counterpoint to all the other lively and radiant objects populating the image. It hovers over the pleasures of life – Beckmann probably suspected that his own would soon come to an end – like a memento mori. Thus, this still life seems a profound yet also humorous paraphrase of the weighty existential problems that haunted Beckmann's life. The master comes across as a relaxed observer of his own studio props.

Based on these observations, we can perhaps venture an interpretation of *Stilleben mit Skulptur*: The man on the left is being tamed by the gentle horse – a reversal of the usual roles. Music, alluded to by the sheet of music on the left edge of the picture, plays no role in this. The spring tulips, by contrast, point to the right and left so as to balance out the opposing forces. What we see here, in other words, are some of the same ideas Beckmann would elaborate in richly allusive detail in his triptychs or large figure paintings, e.g. in *Odysseus und Kalypso* from 1943, in *Blindekuh* from 1944/45 or in multi-layered allegories like *Bildhaueratelier* from 1946. But this time, it is executed in abbreviated form over a compressed creative period. And not without a pinch of humor, given that horse's head actually seems to be amused by the young man.