



Anna Ahrens **The Mystery of Reality: Max Beckmann's „Springbrunnen in Baden-Baden“**

Thursday, April 25, 1935. "It's raining like crazy," writes Max Beckmann from Baden-Baden to his Mathilde (Quappi). "I bought an umbrella and am now going for walks in the rain, which is quite nice." Almost exactly a year later, Beckmann is back at the exclusive Baden sanatorium for a cure. He is still plagued by depressive moods. But things are already getting better. The unpredictable April weather and the afternoon walks so dear to him continue to be a recurring theme in the affectionate letters to his wife. It is the "silence and seclusion" that do him good: "even if it is not so easy to bear and I miss you. But the eternal Berlin – it is very pleasant to me that it is not there for once."

As a close confidante, "Quappi" probably understood well what her "Maxe" was alluding to. Against the backdrop of the oppressively grim developments in "eternal" Berlin – which he had only temporarily distanced himself from – Beckmann apparently sought out the "secluded" experience of nature integrated into the sophisticated spa town. Even if this was "not so easy to bear" for him given the political climate in Nazi Germany – between threat and hope, between war and peace. "It's very strange here again, lots of English people and other 'big shots' from all walks of life. I can't really write about it, but I'll be able to tell you a few things at least," he announced to Quappi on April 18, 1936, with cautious ambiguity. Today, one would love to know what Beckmann actually told his wife. Six paintings were created within that same year (more were to follow), all of which explore his memories of Baden-Baden. They are masterpieces of landscape painting.

To "capture the unspeakable things of life" and "to seize this eerily twitching monster of vitality and lock it up, suppress it, strangle it [in] crystal-clear, sharp lines and planes" – no less an ambition drove the artist after the end of World War I (Max Beckmann: "Bekanntnis," 1918). From the early 1920s onward, Beckmann's approach to pictorial space, emphasizing form and colour fields, became the unmistakable hallmark of his paintings. There is a palpable urge driving the artist, who transitioned from landscape to figure painting, to renegotiate the theme of humanity and nature for his own time. He was preoccupied with questions regarding the conditions of "reality" – of nature, of humanity, of art: "For me, it is always a matter of capturing the magic of reality and translating this reality into painting. To make the invisible visible through reality. That may sound paradoxical, but it is truly 'reality' that constitutes the very mystery of existence!" said Beckmann in his famous London lecture "On My Painting" on July 21, 1938.

Perhaps it is precisely the works that focus on natural motifs that exemplify his self-imposed claim to address nothing less than "the mystery of existence" in his painting. As early as 1998, the Hamburg exhibition "Landschaft als Fremde" addressed the striking prevalence of this genre in Beckmann's oeuvre since the 1930s. Uwe Schneede recognized in them "discreet programmatic images" (see exhibition catalog, Hamburger Kunsthalle 1998, p. 26), while Jutta Hülsewig-Johnen even hailed them as a "singular phenomenon in 20th-century art" (ibid., p. 33). Even at first glance at Beckmann's pictorial recollection of the Baden-Baden spa gardens, a strange mixture of fascination and alienation sets in. "One should," the painter recommended, "start from the composition as a whole," "pay attention to the rhythm of lines and colours and to the spatial relationship of the objects within the picture plane. Only then should one turn one's attention to the

The Sinterstein Fountain on Lichtentaler Allee
in Baden-Baden. 1930s

objects themselves, the symbols, and the story” (Max Beckmann in conversation with Mathilde and students, USA. In: *Reality of Dreams*, 1984, p. 203).

The landscape composition here consists of a strikingly reduced palette of nuanced green tones, bluish white-gray, and brown-black. The triad of equally prominent colours contributes to the unified effect of this pictorial world. The green, which depicts partly sunny, partly shady lawns, a few ground plants, and a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees, serves as a backdrop and frame for the two main motifs facing each other in the middle ground: On the left, a fountain shoots up from boulders stacked in a pyramid-like formation (the Sinterstein fountain, still a popular photo spot for spa guests today); on the right, a round water basin (possibly a pond)—a feature added by Beckmann – is surrounded by a

sandy path that offers walkers various routes through the park. Against the dark green backdrop, the rounded forms of the opposing, dynamic, and still water surfaces stand out in stark relief. “The most important thing to me is roundness, captured in height and width,” said Beckmann, “the roundness in the surface, the depth in the feeling of the surface, the architecture of the image” (*Bekenntnis*, 1918). In contrast to the flat pond, he “encloses” the “roundness” of the fountain, which sprays vigorously in all directions, within a mandorla studded with spikes, composed of tapering fragments of trees and plants. The foaming white of the water particles dancing in the air is echoed not only by the heavy, dark fountain stones lying on the ground, but also by the pond, which is only seemingly at rest. An exit from the circular path along the shore leading to the fountain hints at the invisible cycle through which the water basin feeds the neighboring water feature and subsequently reabsorbs its fleeting moisture.

The artificially generated circular motion reflects the mystery of life – and at the same time contradicts it: In contrast to the eternity of nature, not only can the water supply to the fountain be cut off, but life itself can be ended at any moment. The energizing rhythm of forms, lines, and colours, which relates “to the spatial relationship of the objects within the picture plane,” feels charged with tension like an electrical grid, yet also menacing and unstable. Max Beckmann, at least during this period, no longer painted from nature itself. Nevertheless, we feel his presence in the image solely through the painting – the detached gaze of the present artist upon a deserted area that feels supposedly unobserved. Much like a view from a window, the tree in the foreground, cut off at the right edge of the picture, seems to

authenticate the image of nature as a personal experience (cf. Schneede 1998, p. 22f.). This feeling is further intensified by the figure on a square pedestal on the opposite bank of the pond, which mirrors the viewer. Whether she is walking or leaning and from which angle she is even depicted, the artist leaves open.

One might be reminded of Rainer Maria Rilke’s “little gentlemen” and “their cultures”: “It seems time and again that nature knows nothing of the fact that we cultivate her and timidly make use of a small part of her powers [...]. We lead the rivers to our factories, but they know nothing of the machines they drive. [...] We play as children play with fire, and for a moment it seems as though



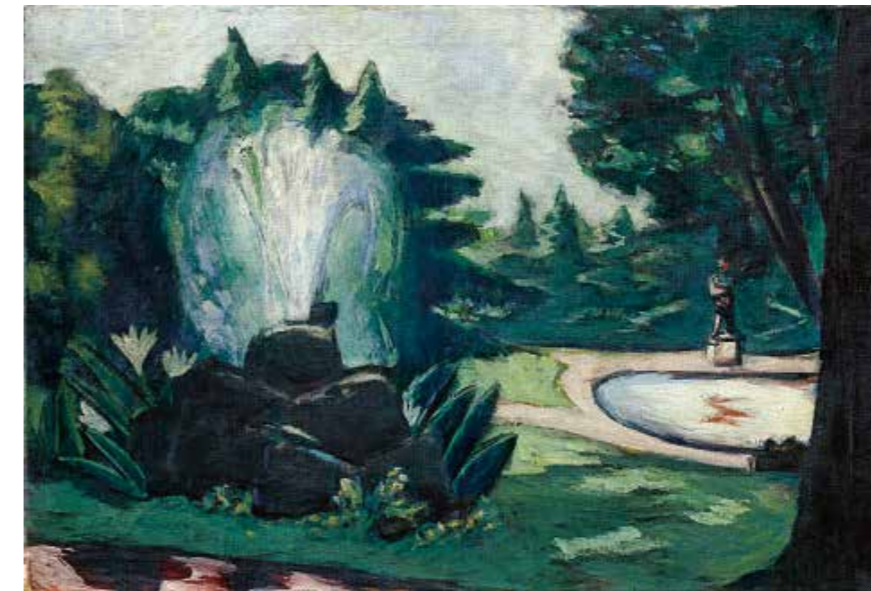
Max Beckmann, out for a walk. 1926



all energy had lain unused in things until we came to apply it to our fleeting lives and their needs.” For Rilke, however, “these forces” of nature “time and again over millennia” shake off the “names” of their “little masters” and rise up “like an oppressed class [...] not even against them” – “they simply rise up, and the cultures fall from the shoulders of the earth, which is once again vast and wide and alone with its seas, trees, and stars” (Rilke, *Worpswede*, 1905, p. 10f.).

Beckmann, too, treats nature as the true, mysterious constant. For him, it is a “mystery of reality” to which modern man has lost all internalized connection – indeed, all certainty – and seems capable of viewing only from the outside, from a distance. “The

most important thing, in any case, is that one lives and continues to bring this ghostly world into the reality of the image as intensely as possible,” he wrote in 1939 from his exile in Amsterdam. The reality of the image – for Beckmann, it is “the only real reality that exists” (*ibid.*).



Lot 15

15 Max Beckmann

Leipzig 1884 – 1950 New York

“Springbrunnen in Baden-Baden”. 1936

Oil on canvas. 65 × 95 cm (25 7/8 × 37 3/8 in.). On the cardboard backing labels of the exhibitions Stuttgart 2004 and Basel 2011/12 (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Tiedemann/Göpel MB-G 442 (online catalogue raisonné). [107] Framed.

Provenance

Käthe von Porada, Paris/Vence (gift of the artist, circa 1937 until circa 1954) / Private Collection, Southern Germany (acquired circa 1954 by the above-mentioned, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 400,000–600,000

USD 471,000–706,000

Exhibition

Max Beckmann zum Gedächtnis 1884–1950. Munich, Haus der Kunst, 1951, cat. no. 107 / Graphik und Ölbilder von Max Beckmann. Stuttgart, Galerie Valentien, 1955 (no cat.) / Max Beckmann. Stuttgart, Galerie Valentien, 1961 (no cat.) / Städtische Kunstaussstellung. Max Beckmann Graphik. Schweningen, Ausstellungsräume der Berufsschule, 1968 / Max Beckmann, Landschaft als Fremde. Hamburg, Kunsthalle; Bielefeld, Kunsthalle, and Vienna, Kunstforum, 1998/99, cat. no. 41, ill. p.121 / Munch, Nolde, Beckmann ... Private Kunstschatze aus Süddeutschland. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, 2004, cat. no. 11, ill. 62 / Max Beckmann in Baden Baden. Gemälde, Skulpturen, Zeichnungen. Baden Baden, Museum Frieder Burda, and Freiburg, Städtische Museen, Museum für Neue Kunst, 2005, p. 64 and p. 145, ill. p. 65 / just what is it ... 100 Jahre Kunst der Moderne aus privaten Sammlungen in Baden-Württemberg. 10 Jahre Museum für Neue Kunst. Karlsruhe, Museum für Neue Kunst, 2009/10, ill. p. 92 / Max Beckmann. Die Landschaften. Basel, Kunstmuseum, 2011/12, cat. no. 38, ill. p. 141

Literature and illustration

Benno Reifenberg und Wilhelm Hausenstein: Max Beckmann. Munich, R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1949, p. 74, no. 364 / Klaus Gallwitz, Uwe M. Schneede and Stephan von Wiese (ed.): Max Beckmann, Briefe. 3 vol., here vol. II: 1925 – 1937, ed. by Stephan von Wiese, p. 451, no. 646 / Klaus Gallwitz, Uwe M. Schneede and Stephan von Wiese (ed.): Max Beckmann, Briefe. 3 vol. Munich and Zurich, Piper, 1993–1996. Here vol. III (1937–1950), ed. by Klaus Gallwitz with the cooperation of Ursula Harter, p.72, no. 715 (to Günther Franke), and note p. 395 / Klaus Gallwitz: Max Beckmann. Blick aus dem Fenster in Baden-Baden. Stationen zum Exil. Baden-Baden, Sammlung Frieder Burda, 2004, p. 30, 32 ill. p. 31 / Bernd Weigel: Die Lichtentaler Allee. Denkmal der Gartenkunst in Baden-Baden. Published on the occasion of the anniversary „350 Jahre Lichtentaler Allee“. Baden-Baden, Aquensis, 2005, p. 68, ill. p. 66 / Anabelle Kienle: Max Beckmann in Amerika. In: Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte, vol. 57. Petersberg, Imhof, 2008 (zugl. Münster/Westf., Univ., Diss., 2005), p. 130, ill. 87

