



## Elke Ostländer **Between now and eternity: The seascapes of Max Beckmann**

"[...] the sea, my old girlfriend – it's too long since I've been with you. You swirling infinity with your lace-trimmed dress. Ah, how my heart swelled." So wrote Max Beckmann to Minna Beckmann in a letter from Ostend dated March 16th, 1915. By this time, the sea had become a primary focus for the artist, and was to remain so. Much later, the North Sea Coast in particular would become one of his favored motifs, long after the fateful year of 1937, when the Nazis began their crusade against modernism in art and culture, and when the artist left Germany forever. He would find a safe harbour in the Netherlands for a time. The last triptych Beckmann completed dealt with seafarers, this time in the context of Greek mythology. He had come full circle, as it were, from his highly acclaimed early work *Junge Männer am Meer* (Tiedemann 18, Weimar, *Klassik Stiftung*), a scene of youths at the seaside.

In the summer of 1928, Beckmann spent some time in Holland. A stay in Scheveningen, the beach resort near The Hague, was to serve as inspiration for a total of six paintings which the artist later created in his Frankfurt studio. This key group of works bears witness to the artist's ongoing preoccupation with his "old girlfriend."

At first sight, *Grauer Strand* from 1928 is a peaceful scene lacking all drama, but offering up surprising details and fabulous painterly touches. The beach is seen over the top of a balustrade that runs diagonally across the foreground with breakwaters, changing cabins, and roofed beach chairs made of wicker, kids playing in the sand. The surf, rendered in multiple shades of grey and pockets of deeper colour, churns with foaming white spray. Along the horizon, the surface of the ocean is more becalmed and seems to melt into the bright-grey sky. Beckmann enlivens this serene synthesis of grey, white, and ochre by placing small traces of colour on the flags and pennants that flutter along the boardwalk, with the shimmering green of the breakwaters reappearing once more in the left corner. The art historian Julius Meier-Graefe mentioned our painting in 1929, in an article on the Berlin exhibition "Max Beckmann Neue Gemälde und Zeichnungen" shown by Alfred Flechtheim, referring to it twice, even: "The small image with the roofed beach chairs in the Grey-White-Ochre merits no less than worship" and the "Scheveningen beachscape with the wicker chairs, a pearl that Manet would have acknowledged" (cited according to: *Max Beckmann in Frankfurt*. Edited by Klaus Gallwitz, Frankfurt am Main (Insel Verlag) 1984, pp. 152/153).

In his famous first triptych *Abfahrt* (1932, Tiedemann 412, New York, Museum of Modern Art), Beckmann turns the sea into a metaphorical setting for a departure to foreign shores. The ultimate fate of the travelers setting out on the journey is uncertain. But this same feeling of mystery, suspense, and expectation is already palpable in our earlier seascape. The wind and the waves could begin to turn tempestuous at any moment, as in another vista Beckmann painted in 1928, for example, *Strandpromenade in Scheveningen* (Tiedemann 295, *Kunsthau Zürich*), where the clashing fury of the elements manifests itself in swirling clouds. On the other hand, the same peaceful feeling exuded by *Grauer Strand* is also in evidence in *Scheveningen, fünf Uhr früh* (Tiedemann 293, Munich, *Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen*), a dawn vista the artists also created in August of 1928. In a comparable, later image, an atmospheric painting created in 1942, the artist has a couple of common gulls perch on the balustrade (Tiedemann 598), from where, birds of fate, they eye the surf and the approaching boats.

And then suddenly our eyes perceive that two ships are making their way along the horizon of *Grauer Strand*. Far away and almost too tiny to be seen, they remind us of Beckmann's brooding impression from 1915: "Everything living was far away. In the beyond." *Grauer Strand* has captured, in a sort of dreamlike certainty, that tipping point between stillness and turmoil, between the present moment and eternity.