



Uwe M. Schneede Landscape painting in parlous times: Max Beckmann's rediscovered beach scene at Zandvoort



Max Beckmann at the beach, circa 1928
(Photo: Mathilde Beckmann)

When Max Beckmann took his annual holiday trips to the Italian, French or Dutch seashores, they resulted in pictures – images rich in meaning that would add entirely new perspectives to the history of landscape painting. The artist did not create them on site, preferring instead to give form to his painterly concept only upon returning to his studio (“I can only paint at home, after all.”). Yet they clearly capture his vivid impressions of foreign coastal resorts: Pirano and Rimini on the Adriatic; Viareggio and Spotorno on the Italian Riviera; Cap Martin, Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer, and Bandol on the Côte d’Azur; Scheveningen and Zandvoort on the Dutch coast.

Zandvoort, roughly 30 kilometers west of Amsterdam, had become Beckmann’s favorite getaway from 1934 onwards, not least during the period of his self-imposed exile in Amsterdam after he had left Germany in 1937. After the Allied liberation of the Netherlands, he noted in his diary in 1946: “Was in Zandvoort and went on foot to Overveen; pretty strenuous, but the sea was the sea again and said, ‘Good day, Mr. Beckmann.’” He was alluding to the fact that access to Dutch beaches had been restricted during the Nazi occupation due to the coastal defenses under construction there (Diary, Amsterdam, 6 February 1946, in: Max Beckmann, *Tagebücher 1940–1950*, Munich 1984, p. 153).

After Beckmann had been summarily dismissed from his professorship at the renowned Städelschule in Frankfurt by those newly in power in Germany, the now officially ostracized artist decided to move to Berlin with his wife Mathilde still in 1933. It was in the following year that he created “Badende mit grüner Kabine und Schiffen mit roten Hosen”, having been inspired by a holiday outing to Zandvoort on July 1, 1934, as he himself noted on the painting’s top righthand corner. An existing pencil sketch of the work, presumably made on location, outlines the motif with brief indications of its colouration. A raised vantage point was chosen for the later painting, so that we gaze down onto the beach with its changing cabin, boat, and mariners, and out to the sea with its bathers. The elevated horizon line, topped by the silhouette of a far-off steamer, falls off towards the right-hand side like a giant wave. In the foreground, we get a cropped view of a boardwalk railing and of the backs of two chairs.

A portrait layout was somewhat unusual for landscape paintings, but Beckmann made deliberate use of it from time to time. In this case, it allowed him to arrange the boardwalk, sea, and beach as vertically staggered planes, thereby demarcating them even more effectively. Thanks to a change of scale, it was also possible significantly to elongate the changing cabin, thus making it seem strikingly alien to its surroundings. At the same time, the portrait format serves to accentuate the verticality of the two masts stretching up in the foreground with their flags, thus arousing our curiosity as to their possible meaning.

What primarily defines the image’s composition is the *contrast in form* between the box-shaped cabin, the longish oval boat, and the swirling ocean. And then there is the *colour kinship* of the green cabin and white boat with the green-white sea. As a consequence, the mariners, though striking for their widely splayed red trouser legs, seem to serve as mere extras in the scene.



Lot 9

Starting in the mid-1920s, Beckmann began to give simple landscape panoramas greater depth by placing them behind structures located in the foreground. Thus, he would create barriers in front of the main view by placing cropped motifs directly in the foreground – balcony grilles, terrace balustrades, window frames, apertures of changing cabins, a ship's porthole, or an open door. This informed the viewer of the painter's physical location, thereby also conveying his subjective perspective. It is not so much some generalized experience of nature, but rather a personal point of view realized with a compositional freedom and a mastery of dramaturgy and technique that are uniquely original.

In this painting, the precisely defined location of the painter collides incongruously with a slanting, out-of-kilter horizon that exerts a disturbing effect on the overall scene. Beckmann does not depict the sea as a threatening force full of surging waves, as he is often wont to do. It is not nature which gives alarm in this case, but rather the visual composition

deliberately selected by the artist. The image's portrait format and the oversized cabin only add to the inescapable sense of menace created by the skewed horizon line, while the chair backrests in the foreground seem to have something of an overseer to them. What is entirely missing is the carefree mood of a summer holiday. People were living in precarious times.

The time and place have been precisely noted: Zandvoort, July 1st, 1934. But not only is the coastal resort noted in the image – the country is as well. The orange flag fluttering on the mast alludes to the House of Orange and thus to the Netherlands. Here, in 1934, against the backdrop of the persecutions underway at home in Germany, it serves as a strong beacon of this country's freedom. Beckmann's use of the Dutch flag as a political statement during the Nazi occupation of Holland would become even more evident in later works such as *Möwen in Sturm* from 1942. In the painting showing seagulls in a storm, the upper field of the official national flag, which normally



Max Beckmann. Study. 1934. Pencil/Paper. Zeiller 45.4r



Max Beckmann in Zandvoort, 1934 (Photo: Helga Fietz)

should be red, has been given a strikingly orange colouration – a tribute to the royal family in exile and to the Dutch resistance movement.

But why did the artist date the work to a certain day, something he never did during these years? Why did he wish to memorialize this day forever? According to the testimony by Mathilde Beckmann, the work was completed at a later time in Berlin, but is dated July 1st. That is when she and her husband had been in Zandvoort. A number of photos taken on the boardwalk during this vacation survive. They include photos of Mathilde's sister Hedda Schoonderbeek, a trained sculptress who had been living in Amsterdam since the 1920s.

During this particular year of 1934, Max Beckmann, who was aware of the increasingly parlous political climate in Germany, took several trips to see friends in Paris and Switzerland and explored the possibility of emigrating. So would it not stand to reason that the Beckmanns and their sister, or sister-in-law, also discussed at Zandvoort beach how life might go on, for example in a free country like the Netherlands? In 1937, three years after the painting was made, the Beckmanns did indeed emigrate to Amsterdam with the help of Hedda Schoonderbeek.

Could it be that Beckmann dated the painting so precisely because of the serious topic? When the Germans invaded Holland in 1940, Beckmann prudently destroyed the diaries he had been keeping, and he had never been one to discuss politics in his letters. But it was possible to include a hardly perceptible, almost hidden indication of life-changing plans for the future in his painting.



Max Beckmann. "Blick aus der Schiffsluke". 1934. Oil/canvas. Tiedemann 409

9 Max Beckmann

Leipzig 1884 – 1950 New York

“Badende mit grüner Kabine und Schiffen mit roten Hosen”. 1934

Oil on canvas. 80 × 60 cm (31 ½ × 23 ⅝ in.). Signed, inscribed and dated upper right: Beckmann Zandvoorde 1 Juli 34. Tiedemann 400 (location unknown) (online catalogue raisonné, query dated 21.10.2021) / Göpel 400. [3009] Framed.

Provenance

Private Collection, Saxony/Rhineland (acquired circa 1934/36 from the artist, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 1,000,000–1,500,000

USD 1,160,000–1,740,000

Exhibition

Deutsche Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert. Malerei und Plastik aus Privatbesitz. Aachen, Museumsverein, im Suermondt-Museum, 1964, cat. no. 10, ill. 57

Literature and illustration

Ernst Günther Grimme: „Am Strand von Zandvoorde“, ein Ölbild von Max Beckmann. In: Aachener Nachrichten, 2.6.1964, w. ill.

- Created in turbulent times on the occasion of a vacation in Zandvoort in the Netherlands
- A simple landscape is charged with motifs relating to the artist's personal fate
- A family heirloom for more than eight decades, the work now is being offered on the market for the first time

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Max Beckmann



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