

Theological Perspectives on Max Beckmann's Paintings

Colleagues,

Now on the downhill side of "70-something" I slide more easily into nostalgia—and the occasional un-remembered surprises that come from rummaging around in ancient manila folders. Here's one for USA Thanksgiving 2005. Background. 1984 was the hundredth anniversary of the birth of artist Max Beckmann, renowned German expressionist, pioneer of "New Objectivity," once a guest-professor in our town (St. Louis) at Washington University. In the fall of 1984 the St. Louis Art Museum put together a huge (220 pieces) Beckmann Retrospective with all the hoopla thereunto appertaining. One item in that celebration was an evening program at the museum on "Theological Perspectives on Beckmann's Art." One speaker offered a Jewish perspective and I was asked to offer a Christian perspective. Here's what I came up with. [Granted, without the visuals you'll have to use your imagination even more than did the audience that night. Think Thanksgiving: I'll bring the turkey; you supply the stuffing.]

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theological Perspectives on Beckmann: Christian

Perspective is a way of seeing. Christian perspective is a way of seeing through the prism of the story of Jesus, whom Christians confess to be the Christ.

My point is not to look at Beckmann's work through this prism, at least not initially, but to suggest that Beckmann himself is using a prism very close to the Christian one – whether or not he considered himself allied to the Christian community. He apparently grew up in a nominal Lutheran home, as witnessed by his confirmation picture in the exhibition catalog. When he said: "Bach's St. Matthew Passion is the most colossal thing that there is," he signalled something about his way of seeing.

Thus my point is not Beckmann's faith or unfaith, but his way of seeing, his prism, as we can see it working in the art here on display. For my few minutes this evening I wish to concentrate on his way of seeing the human being of the 20th century, which is finally his way of seeing us, who are these days looking at his work.

What is a human being? In 1927 he said: "Art is the mirror of God. That mirror is the human race. We ought not to deny that these mirror-images at certain times have been more marvelous [grossartiger] and more terrifying [erschuetternder] than they are today..." "There we have the image of ourselves [unser eigenes Bild]." In that citation he concludes with what sounds like a farewell to any transcendent faith. "We can expect no more help from the outside. It can only come from our own selves."

Whether or not that is an atheist confession, it is a call for us fellow humans to be responsible for the care and nurture of the image of humanity. We are the responsible ones for what our age perceives and practices as the image of the human. Promethean as that protest may sound – and it probably is – it is not all that alien to the Christian story, nor to the Hebrew scriptures upon which that Christian story builds.

The image of the human is both marvelous, mysterious, fantastic

(grossartig) and terrifying (erschuetternd) in the Biblical "way of seeing," and we are the ones who are responsible for whichever of those two directions the image is going in our own day.

The marvel-and-mystery image is what both Hebrew and Christian scriptures mean when they designate the human being as a creature distinct from other creatures in that this one is imago dei, God's own image. Human beings are designed to be God-mirrors, God-reflectors, mirroring to other creatures – and especially to other humans – the power that brings them into existence and the power that blesses that existence.

In the first chapter of the Bible that is done not with pictures, but with words. The seven-day sequence repeats day after day until the rest-day: God speaks, things come to be. Then at the end of each day, God speaks another word to bestow value. "God said: 'Let there be...'" And at day's end: "And God ... saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." The first word of God bestows life and the second values that life, blessing it, bestowing value upon it.

Whatever else God-imagers might have as their assignment, they are called to mirror this power (life-bestowing and value-bestowing) to other God-images and to the non-human creation as well.

In some of Beckmann's humans that reflection of life-bestowing and value-bestowing comes off the canvas from the faces. Quappi, Beckmann's wife, whom he painted often, in my perception is almost always that. Beckmann's own self-portraits, manifold as they are, sometimes do and sometimes don't. His Jesus figures always do that double reflection, but in a way different from Quappi. It is not in the face that you first of all see this life-bestowing, value-bestowing image.

Not directly. The Jesus figures link the face of the human with his action. His protection of the woman taken in flagrante with his body inclined toward her, his hands forming a protective circle, his face firm and affirming – that is a whole human being, an integrated imago dei.

The contrast between Jesus and Pilate in the work by that name is almost classic. They both have clearly human faces, but one is empty, disintegrated. The other, though not pretty, is integrated, reflective of the two words of God: life-bestowing and value-bestowing. “Grossartig” was his word. It is “a marvel” for which the appropriate contemporary response is: Wow! If you are of a more inquisitive nature, the proper question is not: Now how does all that compute?, but Why should something so “grossartig” as this happen to me?

But Beckmann also sees that the human as imago dei is frightfully fractured; erschuetternd is his German term. The fracture is there in his work called “Prodigal Son,” which might better be called by its German title, “Lost Son.” The fractured image is there also in “The Birds’ Hell.” Some say this is Beckmann’s rendering of Nazism, where human-sized birds–in-human humans–inflict hell’s torture on a human victim. The fractured imago dei is there in many of his morbid and pessimistic renderings of human beings and human behavior.

Aren’t these fractured images of God calling out for help? Even the tormenters in The Birds’ Hell are themselves victims. They too cry for help to be restored to integrity, to have their fractured reflectors re-created, so that they too could once more be life-bestowing and value-imparting persons, do they not?

In the Biblical story (Hebrew and Christian) the human is grossartig and erschuetternd. Isn’t that shown us in the

painting of the sinking of the Titanic? Humans create via promethean fantasy and skill (grossartig!) unsinkable ships. But when they entrust themselves to their Titanic technology, it too fails to get them safely across the abyss that underlies human life. The ship goes down. Its devotees go down alongside it. Erschuetterned.

Take the two paintings across the gallery room from "The Bird's Hell," "Birth" and "Death." Grossartig and erschuetternend. Not just that birth is marvelous and death terrifying, though that is indeed so. Birth is both grossartig and terrifying. Death is gross, but not grossartig, and is it ever terrifying. The similarities of the two compositions and the differences deserve more reflection than I am able to do here. The parallels are in the compositions. In both a reclining woman is at the center and an upright figure in the foreground blocking off the full view of birth and death (both are mysteries not fully comprehensible). Birth takes place in a jumbled world, but it is not chaotic. Death, however, is in our world, but it is there as an alien. It makes chaos out of cosmos. The figures in the top half of the painting are upside down and when you tilt your head to see them, they are not human at all, not God-reflectors. They are therefore not life-bestowing nor value-bestowing.

Death is an invasion into the human world, despite its biochemical regularity and orderliness. The death of the human being is a contradiction in terms. Of course, it never fails to occur, but it ought not to be. If death must nevertheless be, then for images of God, another word, an epilogue, is called for. The Biblical word for that is resurrection, a chapter of the story that comes after the otherwise last chapter. Beckmann's did several Resurrections depicting the last day. But they are murky to me, and possibly also to him, since the largest Resurrection Day he ever did stayed unfinished until

the day he died.

Did he ever do a resurrection of Jesus? I've not been able to find one. If he had, what might he have done with a "restored" image of God – Jesus himself post mortem? In the Christian story the role of Jesus is not that he was death-proof (see Beckmann's very dead Jesus in "The Deposition from the Cross"), but that at some specifiable point in human history the inexorable power of death was itself defeated. In Jesus, the Christian story claims, death's last word was broken open with a human being as the pioneer opening for other images of God a hole in the tomb, a light at the end of death's tunnel.

Conclusion.

I was told by James Burke, our St. Louis Art Museum Director, that shortly after the end of the Second World War, Morton May, St. Louis patron and collector of Beckmann's work, was in New York on business. In a bit of free time he dropped in at the Curt Valentin Gallery, which was showing recently-acquired Beckmann works from Europe. May was smitten, so the story goes, by the entire collection. When asked what it was that so fascinated him with Beckmann paintings, he said: "I understood every one of them." No one knows what Mr. May really meant, but he could have meant: "Those works are about us. They hold before us the mirror of ourselves."

To understand them is thus not difficult, but it may well take courage. The Art Museum's retrospective is works by Beckmann; the show is about us.

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St. Louis, MO 9/13/84*