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MAX BECKMANN

1884 Leipzig - New York 1950

Selbstbildnis mit grünlichem Hintergrund [Self-Portrait against a Greenish Background]

Oil on canvas, executed in 1912 in Berlin.

Signed and dated at the upper right: *Beckmann 12*

45.5 x 44.0 cm

PROVENANCE: Paul Cassirer, Berlin – Probably Carl Steinbart¹ (1852-1923), Berlin (Beckmann gives the name 'Steinhard' as the owner in his handwritten list of his works) – Curt Valentin (1902-54), New York (until 1954) – Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago (until 1982) – Private collection, New York (1984-5) – Private collection, Switzerland

EXHIBITIONS: *Max Beckmann*, Paul Cassirer, Berlin 1913, no. 17 – *Paintings by Max Beckmann*, Buchholz Gallery Curt Valentin, New York 1941, no. 1 – *Early Works by Contemporary Artists*, Buchholz Gallery Curt Valentin, New York 1943, no. 1 – *Max Beckmann 1948 – Retrospective Exhibition*, City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1948, no. 3, repr. (loaned by Curt Valentin) – *Federation Exhibition*, City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1949 – *Max Beckmann*, Art Center, Chicago, 1955, no. 40 (loaned by Allan Frumkin) – *From El Greco to Pollock: Early and Late Works by European and American Artists*, Baltimore Museum of Art, 1968, no. 91, repr. – *Max Beckmann. Die frühen Bilder*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, 1982 and Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main 1983 – *Max Beckmann: The Self-Portraits*, Gagosian Gallery, New York 1992

LITERATURE: Max Beckmann, handwritten list of works, Berlin, Winter/Spring 1912, no. 122 [the entry reads: *Selbstportrait (kleines Format) mit grünlichem Hintergrund. Steinhard – now Valentin New York 1947*] – Paul Cassirer, *Max Beckmann*, exhib. cat., Berlin 1913, no. 17 – Hans Kaiser, 'Max Beckmann', in *Künstler unserer Zeit*, I, Berlin 1913, no. 122 – Curt Glaser, Julius Meier-Graefe, Wilhelm Fraenger and Wilhelm Hausenstein, *Max Beckmann*, Munich 1924, p. 76, column 12 – Perry T. Rathbone, *Max Beckmann 1948*, exhib. cat., City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1948, p. 17 (introduction), no. 3, repr. – Libby Tannenbaum, 'Beckmann. St. Louis adopts the international expressionist', in *ARTnews*, 47/3, New York 1948, p. 21 f., repr. – Benno Reifenberg and Wilhelm Hausenstein: *Max Beckmann*, Munich 1949, p. 66, no. 133 – Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1957, p. 284 f. and p. 287, fig. 122 – Charles S. Kessler, 'The vision of Max Beckmann', in *Arts Yearbook*, 4, New York 1961, pp. 133-44, repr. p. 118 – Gertrude Rosenthal, *From El Greco to Pollock. Early and Late Works by European and American Artists*, exhib. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art, 1968, no. 91, repr. – Erhard Göpel and Barbara Göpel, *Max Beckmann - Katalog der Gemälde*, Bern 1976, I, no. 154, p. 113; II, plate LIX – Ulrich Weisner and Klaus Gallwitz (eds.), *Max Beckmann. Die frühen Bilder*, exhib. cat., Kunsthalle Bielefeld and Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, no. 62, p. 110, repr. – Hildegard Zenser, *Max Beckmann, Selbstbildnisse*, Munich 1984, no. 10, repr. – Fritz Erpel, *Max Beckmann. Leben im Werk. Die Selbstbildnisse*, Munich 1985, no. 27, repr.

¹ Carl Steinbart was a banker and art collector. He was Max Slevogt's most important patron.

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Self-portraits were one of Beckmann's central preoccupations right from his painterly beginnings to his late period. Few modern artists have painted their own image as often, both as the main protagonist and as a secondary figure. The art historian Reinhard Spieler comments on Beckmann's output of approximately two hundred self-portraits: *He presents himself in a huge variety of roles and ever-changing emotional states, adopting ever new poses – he plays nurse, clown, ringmaster, dinner-jacketed bon vivant, champagne drinker, cigar smoker, carnival-goer, convict; homeless seafarer, exile and prisoner. He inhabits every role – from clairvoyant with a crystal ball to sculptor in a sculptor's smock. He appears both alone and with his wife beside him, now a guest at a festive soirée, now an actor on the stage, now a solitary 'thinker', now a figure deep in religious dialogue. He confronts the viewer with a piercing gaze or challenges him outright. At times he seems lost in thought, at times intensely focused on his imagery. Tormented, terrified, he engages with the viewer only to disengage, seeking both proximity and distance, questioning; at times profoundly self-aware, at others boldly self-assured.*²

Beckmann's unsparing stocktaking of his own identity is the chief topic of his self-portraits. At the same time this stocktaking reflects the changing times in which he lived. His uncompromising questioning of his own existence and ruthless introspection are just as clearly shown in his paintings as in his diary. His self-portraits offer both a detailed description of his life and autobiographical information on his psychological development. They also provide insights into changing external circumstances and contemporary events as they contributed to the formulation of his artistic and ideological opinions.

Beckmann made a highly self-perceptive statement in a public lecture³ he gave in the New Burlington Galleries on 21 July 1938 in conjunction with an exhibition in London titled 'Twentieth-Century German Art': *To become a 'self' is the invariable urge of every as yet incomplete being. In life – and in my painting – I'm continually searching for this 'self'.... 'What are you? What am I?' These are the questions that constantly persecute and torment me but also contribute in some way to my artistic work. ... Indeed, the 'self' is the world's greatest and best concealed secret.*⁴

The present bust-length self-portrait was painted in 1912 when Beckmann was twenty-eight. His head is turned very slightly to the right. The bluish-green background echoes the background depicted in *Max Beckmann and Minna Beckmann-Tube*, a double portrait executed in 1909 [Fig. 2]. The artist's dark jacket, white winged collar and dark tie appear in all the self-portraits he made between 1907 and 1914 [Figs. 1-5]. His clothes are designed to convey the image of an artist of social standing, a respectable married man and member of bourgeois society.

He appears to be in a dark room lit only by indirect reddish light which illuminates the right side of his face and neck and his right shoulder. His eyes and the rest of his features are in shadow. His face is thus divided into two contrasting areas – one side dark and the other light.

The lithograph *Self-Portrait* of 1911 [Fig. 3], a striking nocturnal image, was prepared in unusual lighting conditions. There is a dramatic quality to the way Beckmann's intense, mesmerizing gaze emerges from the darkness. The use of underlighting has theatrical associations and creates a

² Reinhard Spieler, *Beckmann 1884–1950, Der Weg zum Mythos*, Cologne 2011, p. 7.

³ Titled 'Über meine Malerei' [My theory of painting].

⁴ Printed in Mathilde Quappi Beckmann, *Mein Leben mit Max Beckmann*, Munich 1985, p. 189 ff. – Here as cited in Spieler, 2011, loc. cit.

demonic, almost sinister effect. In the drypoint *Small Self-Portrait* of 1913 [Fig. 4], the light source is on the upper right so that the eyes are in deep shadow and a long shadow is cast below the nose. At the time Beckmann was almost certainly experimenting with light effects. In the present painting touches of reddish light leave scattered highlights on the jacket collar, the right ear, the cheeks and the wall in the background. The red is so intense that it evokes the glow of burning embers, creating a disquieting effect. It stands in contrast to the cool bluish-green tone of the background which is reflected in the shadowed areas of the collar and adds cool highlights to the features. This interest in the effects of light, atmosphere and colour; in mastering fluid, confidently handled transitions between areas of light and dark, testifies to Beckmann's enduring debt to Impressionism in his early career.⁵

Comparison with his earlier portraits reveals, however, a marked shift in his expressive approach. The painting *Self-Portrait in Florence* (1907) [Fig. 1] exudes unclouded self-confidence, drawing on his earliest artistic achievements. He stands in bold frontality before a backdrop of Tuscan countryside, a commanding figure as he fixes his gaze on the viewer, a cigarette in his right hand. He is wearing a dark suit and white, winged-collar shirt - a picture of suave nonchalance. In the double portrait of 1909 [Fig. 2] he is in similar self-confident mode. He stands in emphatic casual pose with one hand in his pocket, balancing his left elbow on the back of a chair, his painting hand prominently and fittingly placed in the spotlight. Here too, his piercing gaze challenges the viewer.

In the present painting his expression is solemn, sceptical, a little disillusioned and weary. Although he stares in the viewer's direction his gaze is blank and he seems preoccupied. His lips are narrowed and the corners of his mouth petulantly turned down. This was the first such image that Beckmann painted of himself and it was to set a precedent for all the self-portraits that followed. He depicted himself in a very similar way in the two drypoint self-portraits of 1913 and 1914 [Figs. 4 and 5]. The art historian Uwe M. Schneede notes: *By contrast, in the 'Small Self-Portrait' Beckmann no longer seems at all pushy, haughty and self-confident but instead is distanced, reserved and somewhat sceptical. ... That year (1913) he had a large one-man exhibition at the Paul Cassirer gallery in Berlin and the first monograph on him (by Hans Kaiser) appeared. From that point on every leading German critic regarded him as the one great hope of the post-Liebermann generation. But this acclaim was not to affect Beckmann's sceptical world view.*⁶

A painting he executed in 1912 depicting the interior of his studio in Hermsdorf [Fig. 6] includes the present *Self-Portrait*. It is prominently displayed in a frame and hangs on a wall in the background underneath a length of stovepipe.⁷ The pipe runs along the wall just under the ceiling and its downpipe is propped up near the self-portrait in a makeshift way using a pile of books. Papers and books spill out of an open cupboard. On its top stands a wine bottle. The studio is cluttered with an assortment of clothes and blankets. The painting itself is in no way consistent with the previous

⁵ Most of Beckmann's early prints were lithographs. The medium allowed him to create softer transitions between areas of light and dark. After 1913 drypoint was his preferred medium. See Christian Lenz, 'Sachlichkeit der Inneren Gesichten, Max Beckmanns Selbstbildnisse der Jahre 1900 bis 1924', in Thomas Döring and Christian Lenz, *Max Beckmann, Selbstbildnisse, Zeichnung und Druckgraphik*, exhib. cat., Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich and Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig, 2000-01, p. 13 f.

⁶ Uwe M. Schneede, 'Max Beckmann, Selbst graphisch inszeniert', preface to the auction catalogue *Max Beckmann, Die graphischen Bildnisse*, Hauswedell & Nolte, Hamburg, 5 June 2013, p. 8.

⁷ It shows the studio of the house at Hermsdorf near Berlin that Beckmann had acquired in 1907. As it was difficult to heat, he used it only during spring and summer. Since 1910, Max Beckmann and his wife Minna Tube had rented an additional studio flat at Nollendorfplatz 6 in the center of Berlin. See, *Max Beckmann und Berlin*, exhib. cat., Berlinische Galerie, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Berlin 2015, p. 257.

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image of an ordered life that Beckmann had been so eager to present. The horrors of the first world war were to bring about further changes to his self-image along with a fundamental shift in his stylistic approach.



Fig. 1: *Self-Portrait in Florence*, 1907.
Oil on canvas, 98 x 90 cm. (Göpel 66)
Hamburger Kunsthalle



Fig. 2: *Max Beckmann and Minna Beckmann-Tube*, Berlin 1909. Oil on canvas, 142 x 109 cm. (Göpel 109)
Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle



Fig. 3: *Self-Portrait*, 1911.
Lithograph, sheet size: 446 x 361 mm
(Hofmaier 25 B b)



Fig. 5: *Self-Portrait*, 1914.
Drypoint, plate size: 240 x 178 mm.
(Hofmaier 74 A)



Fig. 4: *Small Self-Portrait*, 1913.
Drypoint, plate size: 154 x 122 mm.
(Hofmaier 62 II B a)



Fig. 6: *Studio Interior*, Berlin 1912.
Oil on canvas, frame size: 89 x 79 cm. (Göpel 157)
Present whereabouts unknown