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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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Beckmann, Picasso: Painters Reunited For the First Time

by Hilton Kramer



A CRITICS VIEW

The big surprise is Picasso's keen interest in Beckmann's paintings.

In a rare collaboration between two elite art dealerships, Richard L. Feigen and Co. and the Jan Krugier Gallery have joined in organizing an exhibition devoted to a pair of major artists—Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Max Beckmann (1884-1950)—whose works, though they belong to the same generation of European modernists, are rarely seen in close, comparative proximity. The result, on view at the Feigen gallery, is *Beckmann-Picasso/Picasso-Beckmann*, a show that is not to be missed. It's not only of compelling interest in itself, but it explores a relationship in the history of modern painting that, as far as I know, has not heretofore been closely studied.

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Picasso needs no introduction; he has long enjoyed a fame that's universal in scope. This doesn't mean that his work is universally understood, however: In Picasso's case, it has often meant the opposite. What many people think they know about Picasso has far more to do with his public persona—his sex life, his politics, his longevity, his fecundity in creating a variety of styles in a variety of media, and his unembarrassed love of the limelight—than with his artistic achievements. Such has been his celebrity that his name is now synonymous with the very idea of the artist-genius, even among people who remain baffled by his work.

Max Beckmann, on the other hand, has never enjoyed a celebrity on this scale, even in America, where he lived and worked as an émigré in the last years of his life and as a teacher, first in St. Louis and then in New York, influencing an entire generation of American painters. Moreover, Beckmann's private life, which was centered on a long and happy marriage, remain private, and his politics—insofar

as he can be said to have had any—were limited to his opposition to the Nazi regime in his native Germany, which famously declared art of his persuasion degenerate.

Yet, despite Beckmann's opposition to the Nazi regime, his German background has been a problem for many art lovers. This has less to do with politics than with style and aesthetics. The fact is, for a majority of the art public in this country, the school of Paris—Picasso, Matisse, Leger, Bonnard et al.—is greatly favored over that of the modern German school, which for tastes nurtured on Parisian aesthetics is often found to be too harsh, too strong, too naked in feeling.

Even if you reject this criticism of modern German art as a caricature, as I do, it has to be acknowledged that it exists, and it has sometimes proved damaging to Beckmann's reputation. In the presence of a powerhouse talent like Picasso's, however, Beckmann's strengths as a draftsman and painter show to great advantage, and he emerges in the current exhibition as a powerhouse himself—and does so without the presence of a single example of his finest work, the great triptychs of the climactic years of his maturity.


In this connection, it has to be said that it's one of the downsides of this Picasso-Beckmann standoff that it's mostly limited to smallish paintings and works on paper. (The few sculptures hardly seem to be part of the show.) By the same token, it's one of the upsides of the exhibition that it makes us all the more eager to see a Picasso-Beckmann show on a far grander scale. Not until we have an opportunity to see *Guernica* (1937) and other Picasso paintings on a similar scale in the same space as some Beckmann triptychs will we be in a position to make a definitive judgment of their respective pictorial achievements.

Meanwhile, in the show that we've been given at Feigen, Beckmann more than holds his own. In the very first room, Beckmann's *Oyster Eaters* (1943) commands a painterly sensuousness that triumphs over Picasso's schematic *Bouquet* (1969), just as his radical *Crouching Woman* (1930) renders Picasso's more delicate *Femme Dormeuse* (1937) almost mute. For this viewer, anyway, even Picasso's more powerful *Femme Assise en Robe Grise* (1943), with its emphatic black structure, has too formulaic a look to be persuasive.

The really big surprise in this exhibition is its revelation of Picasso's keen interest in Beckmann's paintings, which seems to have had a longer history than any of us suspected. Once we've been alerted to this connection and its implications, both Beckmann and Picasso emerge somewhat changed for us—changed, that is, from powerful individualists into comrades in pursuit of very similar goals.

Beckmann-Picasso/Picasso-Beckmann remains on view at Richard L. Feigen and Co., 34 East 69th Street, through Jan. 31, 2005.

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