

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2004

Beckmann-Picasso/ Picasso-Beckmann

Richard L. Feigen & Company
84 East 69th Street, Manhattan
Through Jan. 31

This wonderfully illuminating exhibition brings together two great modern artists who are not ordinarily closely associated: Picasso and Max Beckmann. It includes more than 20 paintings, a good selection of works on paper and a small assortment of sculptures. Picasso's compact, vividly colorful, thickly painted picture from the late 1930's of a bull goring a screaming horse is worth a visit to the gallery all by itself. And so is Beckmann's "Soldier's Dream" (1942), a complex allegory of lust and death with birdman and bird-woman lovers in a cage and a floozy sitting outside with a big clock.

Beckmann's brusquely sensuous approach to still life is well-represented, and many different phases of Picasso's restless post-Cubist career are on display. What is most revelatory, however, is the dialogue between the protean fox Picasso and the darkly visionary hedgehog Beckmann. In an excellent short essay prepared for the exhibition, a Beckmann scholar, Barbara C. Buenger, writes about the feelings of admiration and competition that each artist felt for the other.

You can see how the mercurial Picasso would have respected Beckmann's unswerving pursuit of his tragicomic humanism. And surely Beckmann would have had to concede, however grumpily, Picasso's joyful freedom of invention. What they shared was a vehement materialism, an impatient urge to give concrete form to thought and feeling, which resulted in art of almost violent aesthetic efficiency. A full-scale Picasso-Beckmann museum show could be just as fascinating as the recent Picasso-Matisse exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

KEN JOHNSON