**Sexual Relationships and Social Commentary in *Acrobats***

*Acrobats* (Figure 1) is whimsical, vibrant, rhythmic and effervescent, with many figures in a canvas with little space devoted to other purpose. This also creates a threatening feeling of claustrophobia. Despite this playful subject of circus performers, the pointed forms of objects, line and figure also make it seem threatening. For example, the sharp angles of the lovers’ elbows (left panel), the triangle-pointed crown on the man’s head (center panel), the overtly threatening weapon of the warrior (right panel) and the pointed hat of the clown (right panel) all allude to a violent and tortured undertone. Beckmann reproduces the chaos of World War I and the onset of World War II in an ostensibly light setting. The psychological trauma the war had on him is apparent: less confident after his military service, he “tried to produce images of the reality he had experienced in a shaky hand.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This huge, colorful triptych shows twelve figures. The largest section, in the middle, is portrait orientation and almost square; the smaller sections on either side are tall, skinny rectangles. In each rectangle, figures performing various activities—smoking, talking, kissing or watching—stack on top of each other on the canvas. The figures overlap and crowd into the frame; Beckmann has a clear disregard for a naturalistic sense of space, and in fact uses this compositional technique to his advantage to create a crowded painting. The claustrophobic nature of the composition makes the painting noisy—the viewer can imagine chatter, music and shouting—but the painting is visually noisy as well.

The left panel shows an acrobat focused on training, right above two hugging lovers. Through this juxtaposition, Beckmann compares the success of a romantic relationship to the acts of an acrobat. Between the acrobat and lovers, a figure serves a plate of food. At the bottom of the left panel, another holds a fish.[[2]](#footnote-2) The central panel features a green-clad snake charmer with snake, a figure in a white skirt, a man wearing a crown, and a small person cradling a toy. Their expressions are concentrated and tense. In the right panel, two clowns drink at a table, and a warrior and ice cream girl look at each other.

Max Beckmann pays women less respect than men. In *Acrobats,* most of the twelve figures composing the crowded triptych are men. The roles in which he paints women are strange, subservient or sexual. One woman in *Acrobats* sells ice cream, another inexplicably cradles a fish, another acts as a lover and one has her back turned, watching a man with a snake. Some men play equally strange roles: a man in the left panel serves food, one man is a lover; the right panel shows strange clowns; one of the men in the center panel holds a crystal ball and a snake. However, overall, the men are more powerful than the women: in the left panel the acrobat is literally above women, one man in the right panel is a strong warrior, and one man in the center panel wears a crown. The arrangement of figures in *Acrobats* suggests Beckmann’s supercilious attitude towards women.

Across the painting, various words such as “Circus Medrano,” “Petit Parisien,” and “Heidisieck” appear. The specific product names allude to a consumer culture in which this third group of figures, on the right triptych, mock or participate. The clowns drink Heidisieck and Dom Perignon, champagnes, and the girl sells Eskimo and Oes ice cream and works for the Circus Medrano.

Rather than naturalistic portrayals of human figures, Beckmann applies the paint loosely, with chunky blocks of shading, disproportionate and expressive, and rough contours. The features of his figures are not delicate; nor are the brushstrokes he uses to build them. The composite perspectives and stacked figures allude to no specific point of view. Some figures are shown aerially, others profile and eye-level, and others in a three-quarters view and farther away. It is as if Beckmann flitted around during the painting of this composition and painted from many different perspectives, which reflects a sense of movement in the painting itself.

In addition to achieving a sense of movement, Beckmann creates a flattened dimensional space by layering objects on top of and next to each other. The colors are not flat, and in fact there are few areas of consistent color. Even the floor shows some variation in tone and application of paint. The figures display shading as well, most prominently in the middle panel, where the blond figure’s spine has a dark purple shadow, the teal figure’s shoulders have shadow, and the crowned figure’s legs have shadow. Even though the figures are shaded, however, the placement of the figures and their props flatten the space. Most notably on the side panels, the figures are stacked vertically to represent the depth in the environment: the acrobat is painted on top of the lovers, but in reality is above them; the lovers are on top of the fish figure, but in reality are behind them. Beckmann preferred “a stronger spatial emphasis” to a dainty and decorative emphasis:[[3]](#footnote-3) that’s why the flattened space of *Acrobats* manifests more than small, decorative moments like the plaid pattern on the blanket in the left panel or the triangle and line pattern on the floor in the central panel, it manifests a chaotic, compound space. The chaotic space represents Beckmann’s feelings about war, while the arrangement of the figures represent his superior attitude towards women.

The fear Beckmann experienced from the chaos of war only revitalized him and pushed him to keep painting. In letters he would claim that drawing “safeguarded [him] against danger and death,” that “the more often you die, the more intensively you live,” that his art had “plenty to guzzle on,” and that “war is something of a miracle.” Battle excited him. He painted from memory; it is hard to say whether the grotesqueness he achieved came from an embellished or faithful memory. Immediately after seeing a bombed cemetery, with pieces of coffin, bones and bodies, he could only think about how much he wished the war were over, so he could paint.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Beckmann drew inspiration closely from emotion; after the war was over, he drew heavily upon themes of war and violence as a critique of society that the *Benezit Dictionary of Artists* describes as “nightmarish.” Beckmann wrote in his journal, “If you consider everything in its entirety—the whole of war or the whole of life—simply as a theatrical scene unfolding in infinity, then everything becomes easier to bear”1. This quote can explain his series of triptychs that he painted between 1932 and 1946, which were populated with many figures in “theatrical scenes,” as his way of coping with the horrors of reality. Not only had World War I ended about just fifteen years earlier, but the onset of World War II loomed destructively in the future.

Just two years before Beckmann painted *Acrobats* in 1939*,* Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica* (Figure 2) as a response to the bombing of the city of Guernica that occurred during the Spanish Civil War. In the painting, which is black-and-white, with a texture of dots like a newspaper (alluding to documentary accounts of the bombing), many figures crying out in pain are scattered around the canvas. The entire form of each body is not clear because of its fragmented nature, exploded and destroyed by the bomb. A man holds a broken sword; a woman wails over a dead infant; a horse and bull open their mouths to yell. At the top of the painting, a light bulb and illuminate the scene. The combination of modern technology and technology and ancient lighting suggest the timelessness of war; in addition, the broken sword, unlikely as a weapon against bombing, supports this theme. Although Beckmann’s *Acrobats* is not a scene of war, the violence of the sharp, angular forms and literally fragmented triptych reflect *Guernica*’s more literal allusion to destruction.

Max Beckmann finished the fragmented *Acrobats*, a triptych typical of his later work, in 1939. Generally, his triptychs expressed opposing ideas in the side panels that come together in the central one. The crowded feel of *Acrobats* is no accident: to describe space, “the everlasting divinity that surrounds us and in which we have our being,” was one of his primary goals in painting. Additionally, he sought to express his perspective of reality, to discover the “immortal Self” in living creatures, and to give form to figures.[[5]](#footnote-5) He was affected by the war, and, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, had a nervous breakdown as a result of serving in the military. Yet he was more energized to create art from his experience, and seemed to relish in the fear it gave him, even at the onset of a new disaster. Beckmann’s *Acrobats* suggests the turmoil from war that he was still experiencing: the composition is chaotic and noisy, figures with bold contour overlapping one another in a crowded, yet flat space.

1. Schneede and Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *1914*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Beckmann, *Max Beckmann*. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)