

GOTHIC ART AND GERMAN MODERNISM:  
MAX BECKMANN AND "TRANSZENDENTE OBJEKTIVITÄT"

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by  
JASMIN KRAKENBERG

Dr. Carsten Strathausen, Thesis Supervisor

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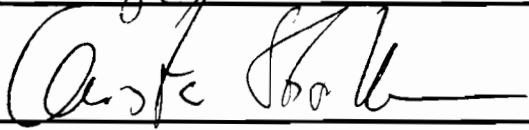
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## 1. Introduction

A painted or drawn hand, a grinning or weeping face, that is my confession of faith; if I have felt anything at all about life it can be found there.

- Max Beckmann, Creative Credo, 1918-

Characteristic for Expressionist art in the beginning of the 20th century in Germany is the utilization of traditional religious iconography, inspired by Northern Medieval and Renaissance art. The historical and cultural references can be understood as a comment on the transcendence of the reality and nature of everyday life. Allusions to the influence of a heightened emotionality and physicality of traditional representations of Christ, such as altarpieces and paintings by the Northern Renaissance artist Mathias Gothardt- Nithard, who is commonly known as Matthias Grünewald, can be found in Max Beckmann's work between 1916 and 1918. One might also observe a favor for the trivial beauty, a coquettish reaction towards the sacred and discourses on the gruesome in order to rouse the viewer's humanity and emotion. Color and form become main tools to depict expression. A characteristic of Expressionist art is the effect of color and its purpose of evoking extreme feelings and responses from the viewer. In addition, the art work calls on the viewer's memory by

depicting religious or sacred scenes and relating them to contemporary life. The influence of religious art of Northern Medieval and Renaissance time within the group of Expressionist artists in Germany, especially the influence of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (figure 1) on Max Beckmann's *The Descent from the Cross* (figure 2), as well as on contemporary artists, calls on the visual allusion of those who see and recognize their technical structure of using traditional Christian iconography. Beckmann utilized the objective structures of Christian symbolism in order to give the emotional *Innenleben* a visual form. The artwork also called attention to and raised awareness of social issues, using religious symbols and themes from well established sacred art works to ensure his work some form of objectivity or truth.

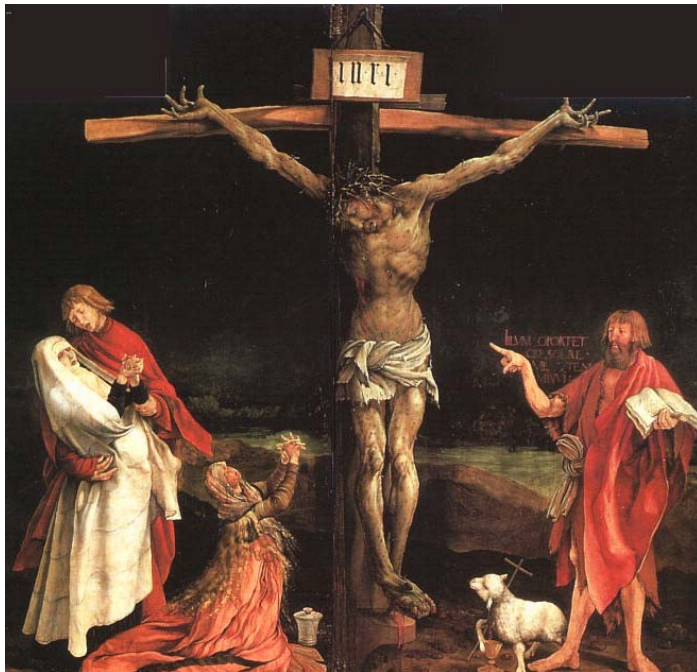


Figure 1, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1510-15.



Medieval depictions and visual presentations of the scenes around the Passion of Christ were often connected to a social context, carrying a healing purpose. Altarpieces such as Mathias Gothardt-Nithard's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, which was completed 1515, right before "Martin Luther banned God into an imageless dogma" (Fraenger, 11), were accessible in a hospital with a direct impact on the sick. In terms of their pathos and emotionality, as well as the religious intensity, altarpieces served as tools for the reflection and contemplation by the sick and emphasized the recognition of sorrow and pain as part of life. The vivid realism of the *Isenheimer Altarpiece* showed the artist's interest in the Passion of Christ and development of abstract style, favoring cold color-tones, rhythmic lines and elegant poses of his figures. Mathias Gothardt-Nithard's style can be included in the tradition of Netherlandish art of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in terms of the emotional-psychological emphasis on meaning. The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and especially the center piece of the *Crucifixion*, shows an excessive physiognomy of his figures that would become so characteristic for his paintings. Nithard began working on the altarpiece around 1513, commissioned by the Antonine monastery of Isenheim (Hayum, 16). The primary goal of the monastery was the care of those afflicted with a disease which was similar to the plague - ignis plaga, pestilential ignis - which was also known as Saint Anthony's Fire (Hayum, 20). The presentation of Christ is, regarding its heroic size and an almost

frightening realism, highly impressive: “An eerie twilight world veiled behind a dark curtain of evening is the setting, but the details of the figures are painted so vividly that they glow out from the ominous black-green sky and the barren, cold-brown terrain of Golgotha” (Snyder, 349).

In its closed stage, the panel in the center piece holds the Crucifixion; the predella shows the Lamentation scene. The middle part is flanked by the depictions of Saint Anthony and Saint Sebastian, the patron saints for plague victims. In its open stage, the altarpiece shows the birth of Christ and the choir of the angels, the outside panels show the annunciation scene on the right and the resurrection on the left side. The inner panels frame a three-part sculptural work of Saint Anthony as the center figure, accompanied by Augustine and Hieronymus. Two more panels visualize Saint Anthony and Saint Paul; one shows the Saints in the desert, and the right wing presents the temptation of Saint Anthony. The open stage of the predella displays the twelve disciples in a sculptural work. However, the concentration point of its perception lies on the Crucifixion with its dark colors that are opposed to the bright middle level. The crucified Christ is depicted in a moment of agony, his greenish skin is covered with open wounds and thorns, and the whole scene is saturated in the dim light of a solar eclipse. John the Baptist points towards Christ. Through the depiction of different emotional features that are revealed in the open stage, the altarpiece becomes a visual invocation for mercy and sympathy-

*compassio*. The stage of the figures reflects a clarity and unity. Nithardt used a pictorial language “that is directly expressive, dramatizing the phenomenon of suffering as well as of mystic revelation” (Hayum, 51). According to Andrée Hayum, these features brought out Nithard’s evident need to communicate with a special group of viewers. I will come back to the role of the viewer when examining Beckmann’s recreation of Christ’s descent from the cross.

Max Beckmann, as one of the interesting artists from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century utilizing Gothic artifacts in his own work, and who never joined one of the groups of artists such as *Die Brücke* or *Der Blaue Reiter*. His conservative attitude towards these groups has been understood by Eugen Blume as Beckmann’s decision to live a middle class life, instead of the boheme. Beckmann painted *The Descent from the Cross* after his voluntary military service in World War One, which attracted him by means of being a ‘Schule der Talente’ (school of talents), a expression used by Karl Scheffner (Blume, 55). Beckmann was stationed at the east front, as well as in Belgium. But even during the war, he remained a loner. The images of war and fighting and death provoke a different view of the understanding of human life and psyche, and they encapsulated the agonizing war and struggling in life as a vital event. His art work has repeatedly been discussed within the context of his war experience. The images brought the internally wounded man out of the rumble of

materialistic existence (Schade, 55). Within the impression of war and the crisis after the war, Beckmann composed an expressionistic-realistic continuation of traditional motives and forms, as well as creative figurative forms of expressions: "The painter had lived through hell; he knew the suffering of Christ when the frail figure was taken from the cross" (Selz, 16).



Figure 2, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1917.

Beckmann's images were extremely intense because of their deformation and vehement color (Geismeyer, 71), which were both characteristic of Expressionist art. Beckmann's utilization of sacred forms and visual motives was directly related to his attitude towards the vitalism proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche. He as well saw life as an "all-embracing struggle that must be fought and won each day" (Rainbird, 98).

Inspired by the format and style of Gothic paintings with their traditional and exclusive religious and ritual purpose, Beckmann repeatedly included religious themes and symbols in his paintings. As early as 1909, he painted biblical scenes such as *The Crucifixion* (figure 4), as well as *The Flood* and *Resurrection*. The style of Beckmann's early painting *The Crucifixion* recalled the dramatic style of French masters of the Romantic period like Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix with the focus on emotions, suffer and cruelty. In 1912, Beckmann also experimented with lithograph prints of the Crucifixion.



Figure 3, *The Crucifixion*, 1909.

Over the years, Beckmann kept his interest in religious themes with an emphasis on Christianity and the biblical stories, stressing the vitality and embracing of all aspects of life. After the First World War, he painted several triptychs and paintings that have been discussed as being parts of diptychs. The traditional value of the triptych and religious imagery was deprived: “the now empty shell sanctifies the profane” (Lankheit, 5). The form allowed expressions of complex ideas in a fixed system, separated into three parts that allowed simultaneous presentations of different aspects of the theme or motif. The simultaneity of narrative moments was not picked up by Beckmann but the format offered a visual form to show didactic relations between several ideas and contrast antithetic opinions: “The plastic and symbolic layering of a work contrives to present a world of multiple dimensions of space and time within a single context” (Rainbird, 37). In comparison to single canvases or panels, the visual form of the triptych allowed more free play in reference to concentration and composition of images and ideas, bringing the triptych out of the ecclesiastic sphere into a secular sphere of the museum or gallery.

Whether *The Descent from the Cross* and the preceding work *Christ and Woman taken in Adultery* were meant to be seen as a diptych is still debatable. Both works are almost of identical size and painted in 1917. A photo taken at the exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* in 1937 shows both paintings hanging next to each other. Beckmann used the visual

components, the recognizable form of sacred images, whether the sacred form of the triptych or diptych or the shape of the cross, as tools for his secularized artworks.



Figure 4, *The Descent from the Cross* at the 'Entartete Kunst' Exhibition, 1937.

Beckmann's visual language and his movement towards a favored universal spiritual culture of the Gothic and Medieval period rather than towards the industrial society of the Modern era showed his interest and knowledge of the tradition and style in Medieval art. The reaction to a materialistic worldview in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany was therefore manifested in this devotion to religious iconography and themes. The recipient or viewer as well recognized these uses of traditional Christian iconography and was drawn into a dialog on the use and value of Christian symbolism outside of the ecclesiastic sphere. The specificity of the dialog will be discussed.

The influence of Gothic art is especially noticeable in *The Descent from the Cross* from 1917. The two-dimensional figures create the space of this painting; the large body of Christ extends diagonally across the whole plane. The soldiers on the left are seen from below and the woman in the lower right is seen from above. This twist of perspectives forces the viewer to focus on Christ. Peter Selz referred to this painting as the “most compelling representation of Christ in modern art” (27). The presentation of the tortured anatomy of Christ’s body reflects the influence of Gothic art and “perfects his hybrid of an anachronistic and quasi Cubistic figuration while nuancing his sometimes gratingly colorful, sometimes blanched palette” (Rainbird, 30). The figures are scattered around the cross, like prisoners without space to move. His special interest in Mathis Gothardt- Nithard, among with Gabriel Mälesskirchner, Pieter Buegel the Elder and Vincent van Gogh one of the four greatest artists “of masculine mysticism” ( Selz, 25), and the influence of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is described in a letter from Max Beckmann after the beginning of World War One to the Director of the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin, Wilhelm von Bode. In this letter, Beckmann asked Bode, after seeing the *Isenheim Altarpiece* for the first time in 1903 in Colmar, to bring the altarpiece from Colmar to Berlin for its protection against damage or destruction. Beckmann was “impressed by its brutal, raw sincerity, most



peasant- like strength" (Copeland Buenger, 158). Bode showed little interest and the altarpiece was then brought to Munich.

Sean Rainbird saw the impact of Gothic art on Beckmann in his intense color and form and the narrow and compressed, stage-like space that show the importance of pictorial and psychological context, rather than scientific laws of perspective that determine the size of the figures in order to give it a "pietistic aura" (35). The greenish tone of Christ's body mirrors Nithard's Christ with "the dead flesh, the countless score and pricks in the torso, the distorted limbs torn from their sockets, and the agonizing rigor mortis that has twisted and contorted Christ's hand and feet" (Snyder, 349).

Among fellow artists in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that can be described as artists of an anti-naturalistic 'resistance movement,' Beckmann was not satisfied with the pure exploration of the world of appearances but saw art's purpose in unveiling what lies behind form. In the tradition of Gothic artists, Beckmann utilized expressionist form and proportion, gesture and color that were decisive for the visual exclamation and its temporary dispute with society and its culture and thinking. Furthermore, Beckmann took Christian iconography, motives and values such as love, humility, sacrifice and affection into his painting. Religion and its values and ideas were adopted into works of art even without acceptance of the Christian dogma.

In order to understand Beckmann's reasons to work with the transcendent aspects in art around the turn of the century as well as his art statement *Creative Credo* that was published in 1918, one might turn to the social background and contemporary scientific and philosophical theories. The desire for a radical *Geistes-Ära* after the death of God, which was proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, led towards a sanctification of every form of Modern life. The goal was found in broadening the internal communication about *Ich-Dissoziation* and the renewal of man in the circle of those who were like-minded. After the corruption of cosmological values as well as the progressive dissolution of the subject in psychoanalyses, Beckmann visualized his interest in religious and spiritual form and used a secular approach to traditional religious iconography. With a growing disbelief in an objective reality, his "emphasis shifted from the outer world of empirical experience to the inner world that a man can test only against himself" (Selz, 3). In the context of biblical themes, the inclusion of the Modern context and environment was significant. Presentations of Christ were depicted in contemporary context, the significance of the triptych and diptychs as traditional ecclesiastic formats of image-presentation was engaged in a new context, and sacred biblical material was combined with the universal.

## 2. Gothic Art and Modernism: Worringer and Nietzsche

Before turning to the social background and contemporary philosophical theories that will help to demonstrate Beckmann's reason for working with the sacred biblical material, I will take a glimpse at the peculiarities of the Gothic and Renaissance society and artforms in regards to religious aspects and how they influenced artists like Beckmann in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany.

The term *Gothic* was first mentioned by the painter and Renaissance humanist Giorgio Vasari in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, implying a negative connotation to describe what he saw as "barbaric" as opposed to classical antiquity.

In 1910, Wilhelm Worringer wrote *Form in Gothic* and evaluated Gothic art against the values of Mediterranean and classical art. Worringer located a Nordic, almost "Germanic drive for expression" (Hayum, 125) in the Gothic cathedrals that strove for the transcendence, represented in the complex linearity of the buildings. The sacral architecture found in the impressive cathedrals related to Christian symbolism. The columns and piers represented the apostles and prophets, supporting the Christian dogma and belief. Jesus Christ was the keystone, connecting one wall with another. The emphasis on wholeness and the impression of uniformity was created, according to Wilhelm Worringer, by the dematerialization of

the stone in favor of a purely spiritual expression: "It is evident that stone is here entirely released from its material weight, that it is only the vehicle of a non-sensuous, incorporeal expression" (106). To dematerialize stone in case of the sacral architecture of the cathedrals is to spiritualize the material. Worringer valued Gothic art higher than Greek art. Whereas Greek art found expression by means of material, Gothic art achieved superior form in spite of the material.

In the Gothic and Renaissance period, the creative self-consciousness and the artist's own perception played an increasing role. The role of the image and its perception depended on the active role of the viewer in order to call on sensitization and education of humanity. The theologian Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, who died in 394, commented in his work *De deitate filii et spiritus sancti* on the power and impact of an image to sensitize stronger than the written word:

Ich sah oft im Gemälde ein Bild der leidvollen Begebenheit (der  
Opferung Isaaks), und nicht ohne Tränen ging ich an dem  
Augenblick vorbei, so lebendig bot die Kunst dem Auge die  
Geschichte dar. (Thümmel, 290)

According to Gregory, the visual arts evoked emotions through the observation of a biblical scene. The image addressed the viewer and by

means of influencing the viewer's further actions and behavior. Especially in Northern Medieval and Renaissance art, Christ was often depicted as *Schmerzenmann*, the non-biblical depiction of Christ's dead body as a human figure with his wounds illustrating his sacrifice in unhistorical scenes, with the attribute of the crown of thorns, mirroring sorrow and pain to evoke emotional response through contemplation over the image. Also, the *crucifixi dolorosi*, the wounded body of Christ was a common depiction of Christ in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. One of the main purposes of Late Gothic painters and sculptors was to create altarpieces that were stationed behind the central altars and unveiled to the viewer like the opening of a book. In his research on the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Wilhelm Fraenger explains that only listening to the written word of the bible was not enough to satisfy the Christian's need for inner contemplation (Fraenger, 10). Through the visualization of the Christian content of the word, literate and illiterate were able to relate and respond. Hans Belting claimed in *Likeness and Presence* that images inspired devotion until the Reformation. Only the self-conscious art historical writings by Vasari brought change from an age of image to an age of art, in which the recipient meditated more on artistic and aesthetic questions rather than on devotional response (Belting, 22).

The connection between the tradition of the *Schmerzenmann* and the *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its focus on the

conversion of aesthetic values can easily be made. Throughout his career, Beckmann focused primarily but not exclusively on the misery and dullness of Modern life. The tortured forms of the *cruxifixi dolorosa* of Gothic art prefigured the Expressionist artist's modern *Angst*, which was set apart from the idealism and the beauty of classical antiquity.

The problem with the term and understanding of 'identity' was also a phenomenon of Modern time that was dealt with in Beckmann's work. When man in the Renaissance began moving away from the theocentric world view in order to set himself into the center of reflection, man became aware of the problem that is now known as the "I", the self or identity. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (first published in 1641), René Descartes showed that initially nothing is immune to doubt except the certainty of one's own existence. Although reflection on the position of man in society is not unfamiliar to the time before the *Neuzeit*, identity became more and more problematical because of historical, economic and social changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the spread of industrialization and science, man's identity was not the product of self-reflection but a given factor of society where identity was produced socially.

Christianity, traditionally defining society and man (*Mensch*) as superior, was still a significant source for the formation of identity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Enlightenment and Romanticism, although

cumulative influence has been lost over the centuries. Until the Enlightenment, social hierarchy defined not only the external norms of man but also his inner qualities. Starting with the Age of Enlightenment, man began to define himself independently from social order or class, and his inner reason becomes the source for behavior and self-conception. From this time on, man is supposed to act reasonably in accordance with his inner truth. Enlightenment for Immanuel Kant meant man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. His appeal "*Sapere aude-Habe Mut dich deines Verstandes zu bedienen*" in 1784 soon became the motto of Enlightenment. The individual became an agent for common reason. Every individual was able to define itself without external heteronomy but the problematic issue of this *Identitätsschaffung*, the creation of the individual, of Enlightenment was found in the fact that man became a representative of universality. Like a mass-produced object, man became indistinctive.

Difference became man's ideal in order to rise from universality and the commodity of the masses. The *Geniekult* during the *Sturm und Drang* period showed the development of this notion right for the first time. The genius was autonomous and communicated his inner nature through art, according to his own stylistic rules. The "I" could only be reached or explored through self-reflection of the inner nature, feeling and belief. The romantic notion of identity was essentially a hostile reaction against the

rational Modern times. Disruption and opposed characters are also typical modern attributes in relation to identity.

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your  
life. (Mitchell, 61)

In these few lines from his poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (1907), Rainer Maria Rilke formulated and understood the picture's active role as something that looks back at the viewer. This conception of the art object connects the Medieval and Gothic purpose of visual art and what we now call "Modern" art. Rilke, who was among the admirers of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, reflected in a note to his publisher, dated September 17, 1909, on a day spent in front of Nithard's Altarpiece in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar (Hayum, 127). He asserted that through the perception of an image, an immediate pretension towards life is made, referring to one of the primary notions of Gothic art, Modern art, as well as to one of Beckmann's central art statements.

In the history of art, Modernism ranged from the French painting of the 1860s to American art of a century later and can even be traced back as far as the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Charles Harrison, the common



features of Modern art such as Beckmann's work were grounded in the intentional refusing of classical preceding styles and the interest in the renewal of the art curriculum, as a result of social and psychological conditions accomplished by Modernism (Nelsen, 180).

The Modern era marks a time when shattered belief was a result of questioning what constitutes reality. Most widely, Modernism is used to refer to peculiarities of Western culture from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until at least the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Modern era, primarily associated with emancipation, but also with skepticism and fragmentation, includes summa summarum Modernism, Modernity and Modernization. Modernism refers to the mentality of the time at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, predominated by the urbanization and industrialization as mechanisms for changed human experiences. The Modern era was stylized in the form of Modernity, which in turn developed through the process of Modernization. But Beckmann did not refuse preceding art styles but stressed the importance of art's historicity.

Diverse characteristics mark the turn of the century. There was a crisis in speech, existence and perception, beautifully described in Hofmannsthal's *Brief des Lord Chandos* that point to the relation between the radicalism of perception and skeptics against speech and the development of modern science with its use of symbols and hypothesis of a plausible unknown reality (Vietta, 149). The haute-bourgeois of the

Wilhemine Era, and especially the intellectuals and artists like Beckmann, experienced alienation, fractured individuality, and the questioning of the subject as a result of industrialization and urbanization. In the city, the members of the bourgeois were not perceived individually but as just another among the chaotic mass. The growing city population faced pollution of natural resources, and towards the beginning of the First World War, it was facing the accumulation of tenements and industrial plants.

The shattered traditional worldview derived from Marx's comment on religion as 'the opium of the people' (1844), Albert Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* (1905) and Darwin in the natural sciences, Sigmund Freud's explorations on psychology and the analysis of the unconscious and dreams in *The Interpretations of Dreams* (1900) and eventually in his critique on religion, Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration of "God is dead" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85). It gave rise to the development of a Modern art movement. Research and science, notably Darwin and later on Marx, freed the world from the old gods. The boost of economy replaced the Gods and rationalism proceeded. The atmosphere, the attraction and the exploration of new ways of world-perception in the major multicultural cities such as Berlin, Munich and Vienna emphasized the fortuity of events and circularized a new aesthetic concept of the artist's work, resulting in a coexistence of multiple art styles that marked the Modern

era. In order to understand the intellectual climate of German Expressionism, it is important to keep in mind the progressive dissolution of the understanding of the 'subject' through Psychoanalysis, which had already been anticipatorily suggested by Nietzsche, and the solution of the seemingly epistemological basis of natural science (Vietta, 144). Freud's insights on the unconscious and the drive, the interpretations of dreams, as well as his suggestion that the subject is not in control of behavior, but history being the romping place of blind unreasonableness, confirm the experience of many expressionists during the First World War.

Repelled from the materialism of the bourgeoisie and mass-production, literal and visual artists like Beckmann asked for a synthesis of nature and culture in order to remove themselves from the superficial and cliché objects. Colonies of artists like Worpswede in Northern Germany left the accused city- milieus behind and created their own, sympathetic world that satisfied their demands and reawakened the senses. Characteristic for the Expressionistic artwork is an ongoing search for context and unity.

The turn of the century also marked the early days of sociology. Freud's psychology was devoted to the study of the individual that was examined in isolation from society, developing an understanding of the psychic sphere, which was comprised of the conscious and the unconscious fields. Max Weber and Georg Simmel rejected this notion and

emphasized the individual as part of a larger whole. The thinking of the time was stamped by social differences, as explored by the sociologist Georg Simmel in *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1890) and *Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben* (1903). Simmel explained the strong distinction between the individual and society by means of the development of work division through industrialization. Industrialization causes a split of social relations. As the world became more rationalized, people's individual needs were increasingly subordinated to the collective imperatives of large rationalized organizations. Social relations also became less personal and every aspect of life became more controlled and regimented. Although religion was not replaced, life was organized by the society and economy, and subject to rationalism. The growing rationalization of private and cultural life and society as societal development was described by Simmel in *Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben*:

Die tiefsten Probleme des modernen Lebens quellen aus dem Anspruch des Individuums, die Selbstständigkeit und Eigenart seines Daseins gegen die Übermächte der Gesellschaft, des geschichtlich Ererbten, der äußerlichen Kultur und Technik des Lebens zu bewahren – die letzterreichte Umgestaltung des Kampfes mit der Natur, den der primitive Mensch um seine leibliche Existenz zu führen hat. (Thümmel, 185)

According to Michael Kahn who focused in his research on the aesthetic aspect of Rilke's writing, a larger leeway is created in terms of the formation of personal identity because the identity of a person becomes dispensable in connection with the function of a society. The omnipresence of the term 'life' is taken up by the art field, as well as by philosophy, which was then known as *Lebensphilosophy* after Henri Bergson, Georg Simmel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilhelm Dilthey. The Fine Arts strove for the illusion of the absence of the physically absent object.

Das Leben erscheint der Jahrhundertwende als das 'Ganze', in dem die verdinglichten, isolierten Einzelelemente der entzauberten Welt wieder in einen Zusammenhang eintreten. (Kahn, 12)

In Modernism, man is faced with the feeling of his personal and social identity being lost, in danger and unstable. Among socio-economic aspects, humanistic aspects evoked the solution of the term identity. In its earlier days, Christian theology and the daily practice of piety defined man. Modernism left man alone to define himself. Man became "the wanderer and his own shadow" (Barrett, 178) and Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares: "Ye creating ones, ye higher men! One is only pregnant with

one's own child...Even if ye act 'for your neighbor' - ye still do not create for him" (Nietzsche, 325).

'*Identitätsschaffung*' became an individual act. Looking at the historical development of identity, it seems that as soon as the understanding of the 'I' became stronger established, universally and commonly, uniqueness needed to be found. Freed from the social hierarchies, status and church, the independent individual had come to the point where he needed to distinguish himself from other individuals. The notion of having to be unique as an individual, as implied by Simmel, is still present. Until now, God, reason and inner nature compete in the quest for being the source for the 'I.'

The problem of identity is a comprehensive characteristic of the *Wahrnehmungskrise* (perception crisis) and *Ich-Dissoziation* (Ego-dissociation), a term repeatedly used in Vietta/Kemper's inquiries to refer to *Strukturkrise* (the fundamental crisis of structure) of the modern subject in German Expressionism (Vietta, 18 f.).

The focus on the subject in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and preaching of the new man - *Neuer Mensch* - was a reaction to the experiences of alienation and disassociation. Nietzsche's aesthetic, his emphasis on life and art, as well as the recurring theme of the individual striving for self-perfection, have left marks for subsequent artists and thinkers. In order to understand the role of art and of the artist in the

context of life around the turn of the century, as well as for the understanding of artifacts from that time period, Nietzsche is indispensable.

Up until the First World War, Beckmann's thinking was founded on Nietzsche's Vitalism (Rainbird, 96) which gave way to his thoughts on redemption and salvation that soon would be supplanted by sacred motifs deriving from Gothic artists such as Mathis Gothardt - Nithard. What connects Nietzsche's Vitalism with the Gothic period, according to Worringer, is "the sense of vitality of Gothic man [who] is oppressed by a dualistic distraction and restlessness. To remove this oppression he needs a state of highest possible excitement, of highest pathos... [cumulated] in strength of expression" (Worringer, 108).

Nietzsche declared through Zarathustra the death of God. He condemned morality as *Sklavenmoral* and proclaimed the life of the *Übermensch*- the super-man: "God hath died: now do we desire - the Superman to live" (Nietzsche, 320). According to Nietzsche, Christianity negated life because of its hope for the beyond, the afterlife. Furthermore, Christians were unfree - *unfrei*- because of their fear of sin. For Nietzsche, Christianity represented the degradation of the human being; free will disappeared because of its *Sklavenmoral*.

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1871), Nietzsche criticized the Christian doctrine for being restrictive with its moderations and for expelling the

arts into the *Reich der Lügen*; therefore it negates, condemns, and denounces (Nietzsche, 36). Christianity is hostile to art and hence hostile to life because life rests on appearance, art, delusion and the need for prospect and misapprehension (Nietzsche, 37). Given his denunciation of Christianity, Nietzsche sought to create the super-man. Zarathustra becomes the enunciator of the overcoming of morality since Christianity and its belief in God accused the primal instincts to be sinful and unrighteous. The criticism on the need for belief came to the fore in Nietzsche's later work *The Anti-Christ* (1889).

As already mentioned, Nietzsche proclaimed in the preamble to *The Birth of Tragedy* that every art is an antipode of the Christian doctrine. Art is the actual metaphysical agitation of man, which justifies life on earth as an aesthetic phenomenon (Nietzsche, 35). Art is superior to reason, thus grants through its aesthetic form elementary *Sinngebung* (interpretation) and makes life endurable. Hence, an eminent position in the reality of life - *Lebenswirklichkeit* - is being granted for the creative-formative subject. Zarathustra constantly refers to the *Schaffender* (creator) as the bearer of the future. The subjective "Will to Power" and the constitution of the subject find their embodiment in the figure of the super-man, defying all moral principles. I am not evaluating Nietzsche's thought on the 'Will to Power' primarily politically, as an attempt of a subject or a political force with the ambition to repress other subjects, but as the creative power in



sense of the being creative and artistic. Art is raised up as the *Grundgeschehen* of all being. Being became creation and art in its nature equals the *will to power* “for willing is creating” (Nietzsche, 230). The *will to power* is creation and destruction and Nietzsche understands the creator to be

A God if you wish, but assuredly only a quite thoughtless and unmoral artist-God, who, in creation as in destruction, in good as in evil, desires to become conscious of his own equable joy and mastery; who, in creating worlds, frees himself from the anguish of fullness and overfullness, from the suffering of the contradictions concentrated within him. (Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, 940)

Nietzsche’s immanent metaphysics allowed a re-valuation of ‘God.’ He elaborated upon the doubt and questioning of what is understood by ‘God’ and claimed that art should leave the old truth behind in order to create a new truth: “Break up, break up, ye discerning ones, the old tables” (Nietzsche, 223). According to Martin Heidegger’s critique on Nietzsche, Nietzsche acknowledged the end of traditional metaphysics, including the end of the modern terminology of the subject by radicalizing metaphysics and the philosophy of the modern subject in his doctrine (67). Under Nietzsche’s influence, artistic expression does not become a

romantic escape from reality, nor a depiction of life being dreamy, illusionist and *weltfremd*. Nietzsche demanded that, with the collapse of religion through the death of God, the individual takes responsibility for setting his or her own moral standards. The artist was more likely conformed in his belief as a creator of new relations. Real life became the source of inspiration for the artist. This effect then rendered form and meaning to the abrogated experience of being lost, through parody of traditional ideals and religious symbolism, which is devaluated as hollow. Therefore, the Modern artist, although working for himself, did not lock himself into a room but embraced and experienced life. Nietzsche designed a modern *Lebensentwurf*, a view of the modern artist like Beckmann as the medium for the re-refinement and re-interpretation of the subject.

The modern notion of being lost was illuminated and defined by Georg Lukács as 'transcendental homelessness' in *The Theory of the Novel*, published in 1916. He explained the pre-history of the ideologies of the 1920s (Lukács, 23). Lukács described a permanent despair of the world condition which aggravated the production of novels. He explained the differences between the epic and the novel, deriving from Hegel's paradigm of constitution of totality (Lukács, 15). The novel is the expression of the transcendental homelessness, the expression of the individual stepping out of the aesthesia (*Sinnganze*) of the world (Lukács,

41). The novel tries to uncover the totality of life which has to be found and created first. Modernism created a split between subject and object, and therefore differed from the time of the epic when object and subject, inner nature and the outside world were united.

Art, the visionary reality of the world made to our measure, has thus become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever. (Lukács, 37)

The desire for private salvation and individual religious experience after the rejection of fusty bourgeoisie norms and Christian morality produced a growing interest in authenticity, truth, origin and unity, or what Peter Gay referred to as “Durst nach Ganzheit” (Gay, 21). According to Anette Kruszynski who published an essay on *Beckmann and the Triptych* in Rainbird’s anthology *Max Beckmann*, the artists showed an interest in older art to express their sense of tradition, finding “ideals of a spiritual culture in the Gothic era rather than in the modern industrial society” (Rainbird, 98). Medieval and Gothic artifacts, in the beginning very scholastic, created from a repertoire of ornaments and form combinations, offered the modern artists an identity-oriented mentality that tried to order the world into a system.

Through his studies of Gothic art, Wilhelm Worringer, whose theories on art were basic to Expressionist aesthetics, saw in Expressionism a new independence from mere sense perception, as well as “a breakthrough to God” (Selz, 82). He considered expressionist art parallel to the spiritual art of the Gothic period. Peter Selz characterized the aesthetic thought around the turn of the century in the field of Art History as a theory of perception, “which proposed the psychology of empathy as the basis of aesthetic enjoyment” (Selz, 6). Worringer’s thoughts were linked to the theory of empathy developed by Theodor Lipps a few decades earlier, presupposing that the world is alien to man and that only emotional identification can fuse the subject with the object. The aesthetic experience then becomes a projection of sensation and emotions, rather than a process of analysis.

Max Beckmann’s immersion into modernity coincided with his interest in late Gothic and Northern Renaissance art. He combined expressive means and stylistic forms with familiar traditional subjects and transformed them in order to convey new notions in the context of art and religion. As a Gothic artifact, the Crucifixion offered an identity-oriented mentality that ordered the world into one system.

### 3. Transcendence and *Inmenleben* in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Modern art scene was primarily characterized by a battle against false ideals in society, a growing disbelief in an objective reality (Selz, 3), anti-realism, a critique of the conditions of one's own culture and society, and a return to the de-emphasized notion of spirituality that was originally occupied primarily by religion. Spirituality was now freed from religion and secularized. The emphasis of Modern art was on vision rather than knowledge, on apparition rather than observation. Therefore, Modern art did not reject classical themes, topics and myths as argued by H.J. Silvermann on *Postmodernism, Language, and Textuality*. Rather Modern culture and life showed a growing interest in spirituality, mysticism and religion. The interest in the metaphysical and the spiritual was one of the focuses of the Modern artist, linking the traditions of the past to the present.

Nithard's *Isenheim Altarpiece* was not only subject to scholarly research of historians and theologians but also available to a broader audience through the reproduction of its paintings in books. The studies of altarpieces in the Modern era gave evidence for the growing and renewed interest in dealing with sacral images and the secularization of religion through art.

What was the impact of the altarpiece by Nithard for the Expressionist artist and more specifically, on Beckmann? When did Beckmann discover the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and more importantly, how did this experience shape his creative output for *The Descent from the Cross*?

*Die Gemälde und Zeichnungen von Mathias Grünewald*, published by Heinrich Alfred Schmidt, included the first scholarly writings about Nithard and his *Isenheim Altarpiece* and did not appear before 1911, the highpoint of the German Expressionist art movement. Following Schmidt's example, numerous articles on Nithard were published, praising his importance for and influence on Expressionist art, suggesting reasons for Beckmann's interest in the past and Nithard for his painting *The Descent from the Cross*. Max Deri, for example, was euphoric about Expressionism and Gothic art, proclaiming that Nithard was an Expressionist. He explained in *Cubists and Expressionism* (1912) that "Grünewald didn't 'see' [his] figures the way [he] painted and drew them. [He] transformed them according to the feeling [he] wished to express. [He] painted in just such an idealistic period, remote from nature; [he] was expressionist" (Washton Long, 19). One year later, Herwald Walden, the publisher of *Der Sturm* and founder of its gallery, also argued that Nithard set an example for the ideal artist of Expressionism. He wrote in his introduction to the First German Autumn Salon, that Nithard, among El Greco, "reshaped humanity after [his] painting...The true artist has to be

the creator of his form" (Washton Long, 56). Adolf Behne, another art critic and historian involved in *Der Sturm*, referred in his essay for the opening of the *Neue Sturm* exhibition to the association of Expressionism and German Gothic, claiming that Nithard was one of the spiritual relatives of German Expressionist artists:

There is no need to say much about the concept 'German.' Only this: with regard to the painters represented here, such as Campendonk, Franz Marc, and Kokoschka, it is best to think not so much of Ludwig Knaus and Paul Thumann who, of course, are also German-born; rather think of the painters of our Gothic, perhaps the creator of the Strasbourg glass windows, of the masters of Cologne or Westphalia or, to name a great spiritual relative of a later time, of Mathias Grünewald. German - here it does not mean pseudo-Gothic style, sentimental poetry, and saccharine painting, but passion in presentation, urgency of imagination, the sovereignty of the spirit." (Behne, 61)

Many artists and art critics considered Nithard from their glorification to what they saw as the spirituality in art. The artist, as well as the society, found little or no satisfaction in the existing reality and sought a relation with the desirable past by referring to Medieval and Gothic art. Beckmann

saw the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in Colmar in 1903 and formulated his love for the images years later in an interview with Peter Selz (Selz, 286). In his *Creative Credo*, Beckmann praised an art style that inflected realism combined with the transcendence, insisting that he was against the subjectivity that was typically associated with Expressionism:

I certainly hope we are finished with much of the past. Finished with the mindless imitation of visible reality; finished with that false, sentimental, and swooning mysticism!" (Copeland Buenger, 185)

In 1918, Beckmann formulated his art principle, summarized as the 'transcendental objectivity' (Copeland Buenger, 185) and published it in his *Creative Credo* in 1919. The term 'transcendental' relates to Kant's definition of the conditions of a possibility, e.g. the condition of a society or culture, whereas 'transcendent' or transcendence refers to what lies beyond something, usually referring to the divine. It is to assume that for Beckmann *transzendente Objektivität* referred to the transcendence rather than the transcendental as translated by Copeland Buenger. Beckmann's art principle basically stood in opposition to three common art styles or tendencies of the Modern era. Beckmann critiqued abstract and decorative painting with its volitional primitivism, as well as thoughtless imitation of



the visible as taught in the academia, and swooning mysticism with its sentimental and emotional art (Copeland Buenger, 185). He required a stronger touch with reality but no realism. He wanted to bring the viewer of his paintings face to face with his own, the viewer's personal situation. The artist was supposed to be inspired by Modern life without being caught up in realism. The creation of an aesthetic illusiveness became then the reality of the painting. His thoughts on art were a product of Modern life, of the experience that objects lost their individuality and that mere reaction replaced emotional response to art as comprehended by Gothic art.

Beckmann's idea of art was based on the notion of salvation, an offer of support to create a better world which was basically rooted in Christian values. Besides adopting the formal aspects of Gothic and late Medieval art, such as the style of figures with their long limbs and strongly expressive gestures and faces, Beckmann depicted traditional themes from the old masters, including Christian themes and symbols.

Among other artists during the first decades of the 20th century, Beckmann worked from a desire to concretize what was essentially transcendent. This desire was especially important in the medieval cult of saints and reliquary, deriving from a fascination and focus on the literal person in a literal place that was given a physical body. Many art critics claimed that Beckmann's interest in the religious theme was aroused by

the end of the First World War. But even before the war, Beckmann repeatedly engaged religious and mythical subjects with a certain degree of presentism in order to show all aspects of life and humanity in the Modern era.

As an artist, Beckmann did not set himself against society. Under the influence of Nietzsche, he saw his responsibility as an artist to document not only the visible reality of the Modern man but also his or her *Innenleben*, everything that lies behind the surface, in order to give it a visual presence. The *New Testament* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were widely read by the German soldiers during the war, as wartime accounts noted. Beckmann too, took numerous notes about the readings in his wartime letters and diaries. With the beginning of the First World War, artists and bourgeoisie hoped for an almost apocalyptic 'cleansing' of their unoriented and anchorless life in order to coalesce in an identity-forming society. According to a diary entry on April 21, 1915, Beckmann felt the isolation in Modern society and experienced even more the fascination of the intensity of life in the presence of the war as a fight for survival under the influence of Nietzsche:

Right now I am often amused by my own, so stupidly though will for life and art. I care for myself like a loving mother; spit, choke, shove, push, I must live and I want to live. I have never bowed

down before God or anything like that in order to achieve success, but I will drag myself through all the sewers of the world, through every conceivable humiliation and abuse in order to paint.

(Copeland Buenger, 161)

In the art of the Gothic master Nithard, Beckmann found affirmation of his search for transcendence.

As mentioned in the second chapter, Nietzsche declared that Christianity is hostile to art and therefore hostile to life. Creation and art are the actual metaphysical agitation of man that justifies life. The individual takes responsibilities for setting his own standards. Without God, Modern man was left alone. The repercussions of Nietzsche's proclamations went two ways with regards to Expressionist art. On the one hand, the Expressionist artist searched for like-minded contemporaries in one of the numerous art movements and groups, on the other hand, the artist stayed in isolation as chosen by Beckmann. Even if the Christian dogma was criticized and questioned, religion and spirituality still affected Modern culture.

It is likely to assume that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century art viewer, like the Gothic viewer, was familiar with sacred compositional devices and themes and knew how to read them. The difference in perception was found in the growing questioning of the pervasive religious belief that

once gave rise to the symbolism of Nithard, due to growing rationalization, industrialization and urbanization with the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, Hermann Bahr explained in his essay *Expressionism* (1916) that the modes of seeing and observing changed, as well as the way art works were displayed:

It changes to as to keep pace with changes of visions as they occur. And the eye changes its method of seeing according to the reaction man assumes towards the world. A man views the world according to his attitude towards it. (Fracina, 165)

To quote Freud, the 'uncanny' situation of Modern life made it difficult for the viewer was able to encode, to read and comprehend those images whose religious connotation gave them something serious- serious because of their well established status in Western culture and society. Consequently, the emotional impact of a sacred image or a modern painting is not always the same. The advances in science and technology created a new autonomy and independence which led Modern man to declare his independence of God. Whereas spirituality became more and more separated from the religious dogmas, the artist was able to reinterpret those dogmas and mysteries of Christianity and secularized religious images. The Modern era did not lack a universal symbolism as

claimed by Peter Selz (Selz, 18) but emotional response became unpredictable. The Modern era lacked a uniformed way of seeing due to a more individualized and historicized approach on side of the arts towards religious imagery.

In *Creative Credo*, Beckmann referred to a 'transcendent meaning' that an art work should provide to the viewer. It is decisive that Beckmann used symbols and motives that were widely understood and commonly known in order to ensure that those symbols were recognized. With the depiction of a common biblical scene, Beckmann transferred his painting into a coherent circle of references. That way, the painting was able to become a more distant medium for reflection of the viewer's own world. Distance towards the viewer was created by Beckmann's style of staging his figure into the space of his canvas. The stiffness of the Christ figure intensified the plasticity and objectivity as something artificial or constructed. Beckmann mediated the content of his work purely through the viewer's intuitive ability to read the formula of the sacred imagery. The content of *The Descent from the Cross* was only accessible to those viewers who shared the same code concerning the understanding of religion and transcendence. To quote Reinhard Spieler, Beckmann used Christian themes as a vehicle to express his bitter experiences of war (Spieler, 33). He re-interpreted the themes of guilt, suffering and cruelty as more generalized metaphors to make them more relevant to his own age,

which leads to the suggestion that Beckmann used Christian themes to also express the bitter experiences of Modern society at large in regards to their emotional response towards life. Throughout his career as a painter, Beckmann repeatedly, although not exclusively incorporated Christian themes and symbols. And even though he set himself apart from many his contemporaries, whose art was either abstract-decorative, thoughtless imitation of the visible or emotional swooning mysticism, he shared their interest and incorporation of the spiritual. But what made his work different? How did contemporaries interpret his art?

Georg Swarzenski, the director of the *Städtische Galerie* in Frankfurt, acquired and publicized Beckmann's *The Descent from the Cross* in 1919 (Gallwitz, 72). The writer Julius Meier-Graefe, founder of the *Ganyemed* press, commented on the painting in 1919 and described the image as being a metaphor for the wounds of the fallen soldiers. By doing that, he supported Spieler's interpretation of *The Descent from the Cross* as being an image for the bitter war experience:

Ich sah keine Form, sondern die Wunde aller Geschlagenen des Krieges, mächtig, mannigfaltig, und überpersönlich wie die Vision mittelalterlichen Grauens in einem Grünewald. (Gallwitz, 72)

In that same year, Heinrich Simon points out that pleasing beauty was not to be found in this painting. He published his view in *Das Kunstblatt* 3, 1919:

...wer Ablenkung von ihr (der Kunst) erwartet durch einen Kultus der Schönheit, bei dem er sich gleichsam vom Leben erholt, ausruht, erfrischt, der soll diesen Bildern fernbleiben. (Gallwitz, 72)

What was to be seen in Beckmann's painting if neither devotion, nor aesthetic pleasures were to be found? Siegfried Kracauer expressed the impact of *The Descent from the Cross* in *Die Rheinlande* 31, in 1921. His interpretation was similar to his contemporaries, describing Beckmann's visualization of despair and death, of pitilessness and hopelessness:

Verzweiflung und nichts als Verzweiflung lauert aus dem Bild hervor. Die Liebe ist aus der Welt entschwunden, der Tod auch des Edelsten ist sinnlos. Hinter dem Grau, das uns umfängt, wohnt das Nichts, und keine Verheißung bricht mehr aus höheren Sphären zu uns herein. So sieht dieser Künstler unsere Zeit, und man muss es ihm lassen, dass er ihren ganzen Jammer mit einer Erbarmungslosigkeit, die vor nichts Halt macht und alles, auch das

Entsetzlichste noch, überdeutlich ausspricht, in unvergessliche  
Gestalt zu bannen weiß. (Gallwitz, 72)

Beckmann himself stated in his *Creative Credo* that he wanted to show what he loved, “life’s meanness, its banality, its dullness, its cheap contentment, and its oh-so-very-rare heroism” (Copeland Buenger, 183). But wasn’t his art more than mere self-expression? Did Beckmann not want to set himself in opposition to the majority of Expressionist artists?

If one accepts the assumption made by the curators of the exhibition catalog *Max Beckmann. Frankfurt 1915-1933* that the figure on the left in *The Descent from the Cross* is a depiction of Major von Braunbehrens, who was partly responsible for Beckmann’s release from military service in 1915 (Gallwitz, 72), this fact strongly supports Beckmann’s pursuit of directness, reality and presence. Also, two figures in *Christ and Woman taken in Adultery* were identified as his friend Reinhard Piper and Beckmann’s wife Minna (Gallwitz, 76). Beckmann used the formal aspects of well established religious imagery, in this case a scene from the Passion, as the objective aspect of religious and ecclesiastical truth and combined this objectivity with his personal experience. It has been argued before that in *The Descent from the Cross*, Christ became an object to serve a demonstration of brutality; he became the cross, and was interpreted as a metaphor for the fallen soldier of First World War. It becomes obvious



that one of Beckmann's strong values was seriousness, and the old masters gave him the seriousness that he missed with contemporaries:

There is nothing I hate more than sentimentality...Piety? God? O beautiful much misused words. I'm both when I have done my work in such a way that I can finally die. A painted or drawn hand, a grinning or weeping face, that is my confession of faith; if I have felt anything at all about life it can be found there.(Copeland Buenger, 184)

Beckmann used a well established sacred image for his own painting in order to establish objectivity in his work that he combined with an emotional, transcendent *Innenleben*. Beckmann's painting, whether before or after the war, offered directness to life in the Modern era by bringing a private experience to the social gathering of the museum setting. This form of self-expression brought Beckmann much closer to his fellow Expressionist artists than he would have liked to be. It is questionable how far Beckmann's art was more than mere self-expression.

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility* employed an analysis of the social history of art and its central category, the *aura*. The aura refers to the customary historical role played by artworks whose legitimacy was found in the ritual and cultic use such as

religious Gothic paintings: “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual” (Benjamin, 105).

As an object of religious veneration, the work of art acquires a sense of uniqueness, an authenticity. For Benjamin, the most significant aspect of the production and reproduction of artwork in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the increasing intervention of technical means in these processes resulting in the decline of the aura. By objectifying Christ in his image, Beckmann’s Christ-like figure became indifferent, since everything was replaceable. The object took on a new function: the exhibition value shifted the artwork from itself as an entity to the point of intersection between work and the viewer of the work. The missing ritual value of the more individualized art works that incorporated the religious motives challenged the way the viewer had to approach the artwork. Whereas the pious viewer of Nithard’s Crucifixion approached the altarpiece with devotion and concentration, Beckmann’s image offered no instructions of how to approach and especially how to interpret the image of Christ. The most important difference between Beckmann’s and Nithard’s artefacts, besides their different working periods and formal approaches concerning the visualization of Christ, can be found in the different values of their paintings. In the end, art still remains behind museum walls, performed under exclusion of the public audience.

But what did happen to the religious, mystic idea of Jesus on the cross, the self-sacrificing savior depicted by Nithard and adopted by Beckmann before and after the war? One could imagine that those who experienced the war saw the willingness of sacrificing one's own life for another. Beckmann's confessions on May 11, 1915, that it was good for him that there was war put him in touch with the experience of being alive:

It is good for me that there is war now. Everything I did previously was no more than an apprenticeship. I am still learning and growing. (Copeland Buenger, 169)

Going into his art studio did not give him this experience, but through his military service, he was being ripped back into being alive. Beckmann's Christ figure did not lose its physicality. Therefore, an immediate recognition of the form to a large group of viewers could be assumed, including its emotional connotations. But what besides the recognition of the form was left in Beckmann's painting? And what does the painting offer to those who have not directly experienced the horrors of war?

Beckmann might set himself against the Expressionist movements but he did not see his role as an artist to be outside society. His aim was still to offer directness through art and to "get as close to the people as possible"

(Copeland Buenger, 184). Here, Beckmann seemed to take on the 'O Mensch'-pathos of the Expressionists and the naive belief in the renewal of mankind under the influence of Nietzsche but soon realized the alienation of the artist and his work from society. The ecstatic visionary pathos of Expressionism was transformed by Beckmann into an almost resigned attitude. His figures turn away their heads from the oversized cross-shaped body and the darkened sun "leaves only a dark, carmine halo to shine on the desolate scene" (Lackner, 16). Krusynski argued that the shattered experiences of the First World War made Beckmann wanting to offer moral support through art that was founded on a notion of social salvation (Rainbird, 97). Beckmann took his pre-war ambition of depicting subject matters that mirror the dark side of the human condition in the Modern era a step further, developing a more individualized formal style. In 1912, Beckmann already commented in *Thoughts on Timely and Untimely Art* as a response to Franz Marc's essay *The New Painting* that "the laws of art are eternal and unchangeable, like the moral laws within us" (Copeland Buenger, 100). But with the darkened sun as a symbol of utter despair, Beckmann did not necessarily leave much room for hope. Also, the narrow space of his canvas did not leave much room for the figures to move.

Beckmann chose to visualize a well established and distinct subject for *The Descent from the Cross*. That way, he insured the image's directness by

recognition. After all, the story that we have in Western civilization is based on the Bible and I am not in the position to state whether or not the view of the world and universe that belongs to the first millennium B.C. still accords to our concept of man's dignity. But it is undeniable that the biblical story like any other myth served (and still serves) a pedagogical function of how to live. The scholar Joseph Campbell, an influential scholar of Mythology, explained in an interview with the journalist Bill Moyers that the biblical literature used to be part of everybody's education and that it used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. On the question: 'Why myth? What do they do to my life?' Campbell responded that when the story is in the viewer's mind, he sees its relevance to something that has happened in his own life (Flowers, 4). The visualization of the tortured anatomy, the crowded space and the angular composition intensifies Beckmann's charge against mere response towards crucial events, in combination with the emotionless, dull, and almost resigned figures around Christ.

By incorporating myths or religion into his work, Beckmann's painting became a crucial part of the process of socialization. His painting, like myths and religion, depended on the language and symbolic system of a society, and therefore became exclusive. The secular approach towards traditional religious motives and the past during a time of radical changes in society is only meaningful and reliable and trustworthy when

these motives are recognized and accepted as traditionally religious. That is to say, Beckmann gave a transcendent subject matter an appearance of profaneness in order to communicate to a broader audience by secularizing the religious image and humanizing the sacred. By depicting a biblical scene, Beckmann was less concerned with the pietistic aura that enfolded Gothic imagery like the *Isenheim Altarpiece*; nor was he concerned about the nostalgia of a lost era, for which many of his contemporaries were searching. Beckmann gave his image a profane aura, simply by stripping down the sacredness of a traditional, almost authentic image of the Crucifixion. Beckmann left no room for the depiction of the cross from which Christ descended; only Christ's stiff body reminds the viewer of this important objective symbol of Christianity. Christ is and was the living myth of our culture, representing the glorified totality of the divine.

What remained from Beckmann's image depicting Christ that was secularized and stripped of from its devotional and pietistic aura? Did Beckmann fill the secularized form with something new? Was Beckmann's image perceived as a critique of Christianity? Was the only purpose of his paintings to remaster his war trauma as claimed by Peter Lackner? Or is there more to be found than explosive self-expression?

#### 4. Visual Art and Emotional Response

To build a tower in which humanity can shriek out its rage and despair and all its poor hopes and joys and wild yearning. A new church. Perhaps this age will help me.

-Max Beckmann, *Creative Credo*, 1918-

Kruszynski argued that Beckmann sanctified the profane and used the dignity and awe-inspiring characteristics of religious art to lead his viewers towards a potentially transcendental experience (Rainbird, 102). But Beckmann secularizes the distinct Christian motive in *The Descent from the Cross* by objectifying Christ in favor of the viewer's capability to emotional response. If Beckmann criticized Expressionist art with its mere reactions that replaced emotional response to art as comprehended by Gothic art, in what way was his art different? In what way could the potential experience have been transcendent?

The presence of the transcendence as in the divine and the myth has long been discussed, mostly with focus on Beckmann's later work and his triptychs. From the academic writing we have learned that he had read the *New Testament* and Nietzsche, and also that he was attracted to the art of the Gothic period. Beckmann published his art statements in his *Creative Credo* shortly after painting *The Descent from the Cross*. His

thoughts on art should not be looked at separately from the impact it had on his work.

Beckmann's artwork held the notion of being out of space and time by working with and including myth and religious themes into the work, and at the same time these artworks offered objectivity, an archaic truth, as described by Beckmann's fellow artist Emil Nolde:

Who among us knows the Edda, the Isenheim Altar, Goethe's Faust, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, all these runes hewn in stone, these proud, sublime works of Nordic Germanic people! There are eternal truths, and not the intoxications of the day. (Emil Nolde from *Jahre der Kämpfe*. Chipp, 151)

I have already established the context for the overall interest in mythology and religion at the turn of the century that was understood as a reaction against the growing rationalization and its demythologizing of life in the Modern era. For Beckmann, Gothic art offered a return to the spiritual, transcendent, mystical, and religious aspects of life that were experienced as being lost in the Modern era. Art for Beckmann was no romantic escape from reality, no depiction of life being illusionist or *weltfremd*. Rather Beckmann historicized and individualized the religious theme in *The Descent from the Cross*, as compared to Nithard's painting, in



favor of the potential viewer's capability to sympathize not primarily in regards to Christ but in regards to the figures surrounding Christ in terms of their human-ness.

The purpose of Beckmann's art can be found in his intent to document the social situation of German society during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as others have pointed out, the First World War. It was significant to include figures that were identifiable as Beckmann's contemporaries. Whereas Nithard's painting had a devotional purpose and was painted for a specific location with the certainty that the viewer would know how to approach the altarpiece, Beckmann's painting lacked a ritual purpose. Beckmann's painting was painted for the gallery space. At the time he painted *The Descent from the Cross*, Beckmann was already a well established artist in Germany, whose work had been on display in several German cities, in Paris, as well as in a retrospective at the Cassirer Gallery in Berlin in 1913. One could suggest the viewer's confusion with the painting that held the Crucifixion but lacked a certain devotional character. Most noticeably must also have been the absence of the cross. It is obvious that Beckmann chose to replace the cross by having Christ represent, even become the cross. The viewer's focus then shifted from the central cross figure to the two groups of people on each side of the painting that were divided not by a wood cross but by a ladder. Although the main focus point was Christ, the viewer would not necessarily have

been emotionally drawn into the image because of Christ, but because of the figure on the right that looked directly towards the viewer. Beckmann used the viewer's capacity to sympathize with the figures in order to give his work a stronger emotional appeal. The reactions and interpretations by Kracauer, Simon and Meier-Graefe showed possible emotional appeal and reactions of *The Descent of the Cross*.

The viewer's visual perception liberated Beckmann from the traditional standards of art as the expression of an idea, from the materialistic theories, and also from the understanding of art being a representation of nature. The standardized art value was established in the visual perception of the artwork itself. The concept of empathy goes back to the Romantic literature of Novalis and Schlegel. Empathy means *Einfühlung* in German, which literally means 'in-feeling.' Wilhem Worringer wrote *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* in 1908 as an approach to show that the art historical system was built upon a socio-psychological mechanism. Instead of proclaiming that art was produced by means of striving towards a mimetic ideal, Worringer declared that changes in social and psychological situations in a society caused changes in art styles and qualities, which can be related to Bahr's thoughts on the different modes of seeing. The notion of empathy has always been there, either within the artist who felt sympathetic to nature, or within the viewer who felt empathetic towards an image. The viewer's sense of beauty derived

from his capability to relate to a specific art work. Concerning the Expressionist artists, Worringer demanded that the artist had to create a clear picture of a society if his intent was to communicate and offer moral support in a chaotic world through the reduction of form:

Die einfache Linie und ihre Weiterbildung in rein geometrische Gesetzmäßigkeit musste für den durch die Unklarheit und Verworrenheit der Erscheinungen beunruhigten Menschen die größte Beglückungsmöglichkeit darbieten. (Worringer, 55)

Deriving from the connection between empathy and nature or reality, *Einfühlung* changed its meaning with the artists of *Der Blaue Reiter*. Franz Marc claimed 1912 in *The New Painting* that “art was and is in its make-up, in every period, the boldest departure from nature and ‘simplicity,’ the bridge into the realm of the spirit, the necromancy of mankind” (Copeland Buenger, 98). In his answer, Beckmann associated his art with *Einfühlung* and he identified Marc’s art as abstraction as defined by Worringer. In the end, Beckmann distinguished his art, which is capable of evoking an entire individual world, from Marc’s art with its abstract approach that distances itself from the world (Copeland-Buenger, 99-100).

I mentioned before that Beckmann was primarily concerned with the composition of his paintings and the importance of volume, size and line.

He clearly divided his painting into two sections by placing the ladder into the center of the composition. On both sides of the painting, he depicted two figures surrounding Christ who in his cross-shaped posture connects all sides of the image. According to Worringer, Beckmann's art was integrated into a socio-psychological complex that did not see art as something beautiful, pleasing or aesthetic but as a specific expression of the time when it was produced. He saw the need to empathize as a need for self-expression, connecting the capability of emotional response, sympathy and empathy, as well as the bodily consciousness with religion and spirituality.

David Morgan also wrote about the notion of empathy in relation to Modern art. To quote Morgan, empathy describes the projection of oneself into the feeling among other, whereas sympathy is the correspondence or harmony of feelings among people (Morgan, 59). Pietistic imagery and devotional images such as the *Isenheim Altarpiece* seized on the body as a medium for identification with Christ to render a cure of bodily and spiritual affliction. In its original setting, the image of the tortured body of Christ elicited a sympathetic response of those experiencing similar bodily suffer. Others might not have had the same response, but felt empathy like those figures that exhibited gestures that elicited an empathetic response as displayed by Nithard. Whereas Nithard's *Isenheim Altarpiece* displayed emotional response as a model for the viewer, Beckmann

showed life's "dullness and its cheap contentment" (Copeland-Buenger, 184).

In a letter of February, 8, 1918, Beckmann told his publisher about his visit to Worringer's lecture in Frankfurt (Gallwitz, Schneede, van Weise, 164) which leads to the assumption that Beckmann must have been familiar with Worringer's work and the concept of emotional responses. Under the influence of Nietzsche and Worringer, Beckmann painted *The Descent from the Cross* in order to confront the potential viewer with their fate and the banality of their time.

In the last chapter, I suggested that Beckmann's painting could almost be understood as an anti-picture of the Christian dogma. Christian art took comfort in the Christian faith by creating a myth. According to Joseph Campbell, myths were designed to harmonize the mind and the body (Flowers, 70). The myth and rites were means of putting the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way that nature dictates. The depiction of the Crucifixion was related to the belief in the resurrection of Christ. Beckmann did not teach or promise hope, nor judge the Christian dogma through his art. His art should rather be seen as a document, and to quote Beckmann, a visualization of life's meanness, its banality, its cheap contentment. In order to be true to his approach, Beckmann used well established symbolism of Christianity as something

objective, even archaic for a visual language that would show Modern man's imperfection.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The purpose of Nithard's art and the work of his contemporaries was found in the ritual use and the educational purpose between image and viewer. In the Modern era, the status of an artwork changed from a ritual object to an exhibition object. Beckmann called attention to a need for changing art values, a need for a new cult value of the artwork. This need was grounded in a strong belief of art's charge to comment on humanity and to confront the potential viewers with their fate and the banality especially of life in the Modern city. The Modern era required art to be subjective and critical, expressing doubts, and reflecting disruption in the religious life for it to be authentic and reliable. Beckmann did not need the devotional character of the painting in order to appeal to a bigger audience, as opposed to the radical expressionists with their distorted and wild colors. Beckmann did not see himself as the creator of something radically new; his painting was not just about painting, self-possessed, exploring its own primary possibilities. He focused on the educational character of the image. *The Descent from the Cross* does not require one to believe the Christian doctrine or agree with the ecclesiastical theology in

order to call immediate attention to the familiar scene and form.

Beckmann's Christ-like figure appeals and attracts a great deal of attention because of its immediate recognition and its implied pathos that is less excessive if compared to Nithard's Crucifixion scene. In Beckmann's painting, Christ establishes an immediate emotional response, evoked by the relation to one's own situation. Influenced by Nietzsche, Beckmann turned to Christian motives for his painting whose code of the objective, ecclesiastic truth was able to evoke a sense of comprehension in the viewer on a visual level using "volume, trapped in height and width," as well as active figures. Although Nietzsche proclaimed the "Death of God" as well as the death of Christian morality and metaphysics, and weakened the central symbols, institutions and beliefs of Western culture, which had already suffered during the Age of Reason, Beckmann turned to religious symbols and mythology as well established tools.

The use of these images in public might result in a trivialization of symbols according to Neil Postman: "Symbols that draw their meaning from traditional religious or national contexts must therefore make important as quickly as possible- that is, drained of sacred or even serious connotations" (165). Beckmann secularized the religious image from its complex dogma of Christianity that was not able to satisfy Modern life. The symbols of Christ and the shape of the cross connected the present to the past or past traditions. As a sacred symbol, it related to shared

experiences and memory, so therefore it could be used as a powerful tool to evoke immediate recognition and emotional response. The value of the transcendence or mythical of human emotions was used by Beckmann as means to escape naturalism and enhanced without excessive self-expression. Also, *The Descent from the Cross* drew on the heritage of art that must be kept alive, according to Beckmann. Instead of imitating the visible reality, Beckmann showed the transcendent, the metaphysical 'reality' of the German society. He also used religious imagery whose archetypes of Christ, the cross and the blackened sun, gave a figural presence, an archaic truth or objectivity to what was problematic to visualize within the limits of perception.

The recognition of the religious symbols used by Beckmann also shows the power of such images. As David Morgan stated, the power of such images lays in the accessibility, defining the individual and the community, even a culture. Calling on what Morgan calls "the psychology of recognition of signs" (34), the representation of a particular image becomes a representation of the collective of a society. Beckmann's painting *The Descent from the Cross* is part of an interpretation of ongoing traditions of images using religious symbols that remind the potential viewer of his cultural heritage. Each image is a variation, an adoption on the same theme and "comes to represent the class in the minds of those



who recognize their collective relations to one another in the features of the image" (Morgan, 47).

In *The Descent from the Cross*, Beckmann encapsulated the past, the present and future in a single painting, offering an image that conjured historic and contemporary elements within the grammar of religion. It is important to recognize the present time and the future as part of the past, including religious and historical facts and aspects. Beckmann considered the familiar context of the images and took the historical, symbolic, traditional aspect of the social issues and projected them to his present.

Beckmann's art has been interpreted as a visualization of the cry of horror with its tormented souls as claimed by Lackner although Beckmann tried to keep distance from the romantic exaggeration of *Der Schrei* and the *O-Mensch Pathos*. But it is important to recognize his earlier work in this context as well. Throughout his career as an artist, Beckmann had been fascinated with all aspects of humanity and he repeatedly used religious and mythological 'tools' to visualize the transcendent emotions within Modern man.

The objectivity of Christ and the focus on the dull expressions of the figures in *The Descent from the Cross* did not necessarily evoke a transcendent experience with the divine as suggested by Kruszynski. Rather the painting was capable of evoking an emotional response, whether sympathetic or empathetic by recognizing one's own situation.

Beckmann relied on this virtually intuitive response to his painting. It can only be assumed, in consideration of Morgan's distinction between sympathetic and empathetic response, that *The Descent from the Cross* in its original context within the post-war museum space, evoked the same sympathetic response that Nithard's altarpiece evoked in his viewer within the hospital setting.

It is arguable whether or not Beckmann failed to refer to more stages of identity in addition to religion and nationality in order to be less exclusive. But we also have to keep in mind that the artist painted not primarily for the future but for a contemporary audience. The painting could never escape the circumstances of its production. Also, one might see a problem with Beckmann's use of objectivity in art. It is not a focus of discussing whether or not an artwork is able to be objective. Beckmann tried to find a way out of the extreme subjective self-expression of his time. He used the objectivity of religion, its constitutions and well established symbols such as the cross and/or the sacred format of the triptych or diptych deriving from Gothic artefacts, secularized them in order to charge humanity with its dullness and callous emotional response to art and even life at large, and to end the notion of staring straight into the dull face of Modern life.

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