Max Beckmann (German, 1884-1950)

Les Artistes mit Gemüse (Artists with Vegetables), 1943
Oil on canvas, 58 15/16 x 45 3/16”
University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946
WU 3789

Between April 6, 1942 and January 17, 1943, Max Beckmann, who was living in exile in Amsterdam, conceived his multilayered and ambiguous group portrait Les Artistes mit Gemüse or Artists with Vegetables. During that time, the world political situation was in many ways reaching a climax. Beckmann witnessed the occupation of Holland by Nazi Germany, and in January 1942 the Nazi regime had arrived at the “final solution” to systematically eradicate European Jewry. The yellow star was implemented throughout Western Europe, Dutch Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and Nazi Germany incurred important losses on the Eastern front. In this painting, Beckmann’s depiction of four materially deprived-looking men gathered in a constricted interior around a small, white, candlelit table—as if joined in conspiracy—captures this atmosphere of uncertainty, persecution, and war.

In accordance with Beckmann’s conception of Modernism as an independent venture, the encounter depicted in Les Artistes mit Gemüse is fictional, although the figures pictured were real and living in Holland as German exiles: the abstract and constructivist painter Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart (1899–1962) is in the lower left corner; the figurative painter Otto
Herbert Fiedler (1891–1962) is above him; to Fiedler’s right is the philosopher Wolfgang Frommel (1902–86); and at the bottom right is Beckmann himself. This enigmatic composition encourages two divergent readings. On one hand, it appears to be a depiction of the collective and spiritually inflected experience of four German exiles. Indeed, the painting is often interpreted as a paradigmatic exile artwork visualizing the resistance of German artists and intellectuals to the Third Reich and its derogatory cultural politics. The title of the work conveys a sense of irony or even cynicism about the status of the Modern artist during the Third Reich. This is accomplished by its combination of French and German language elements, indexical of Beckmann’s status as exile and the loss of a mother tongue. While the French “artistes” contributes to stressing the superiority of the creative individual, the elitist or even transcendental role of the artist, the German “gemüse” faces the facts of artistic life in wartime Amsterdam, where the artist is holding onto some trivial item of food. Moreover, the red background behind Frommel’s head references the threat of war penetrating into the self-contained yet distorted space in which the painting is set.

On the other hand, certain factors suggest a composition that underscores a less connected representation of individuals. For example, the absence of any visible interaction between the men, which would encourage a narrative line, plays up their independent status. Each exile holds an object, only one of which clearly resembles a vegetable: the carrot or turnip that Vordemberge-Gildewart holds. Fiedler’s object is a fish; Frommel’s resembles bread, a booklet, or possibly a cabbage; in Beckmann’s left hand is a mirror. These objects take on the character of attributes for which various readings exist; however, none of them is ultimately definitive. In contrast to his actual unlit profile in the painting, the mirror in Beckmann’s hand reflects a strongly lit and somewhat distorted clown face, encouraging interpretations that
distinguish the artist as an outsider and isolated individual. His double self-portrait and double isolation as a clown, along with his status as the only dark face in the painting, invite readings that center on Beckmann’s identity rather than the partially lit faces of the other men. Their faces are, in contrast to Beckmann’s, subtly illuminated by the candle, and Frommel seems to be dressed as a priest, thus indicating a spiritual mood.

The fact that this is an imagined gathering begs several questions: Why would Beckmann choose to depict himself in the company of these three men? How do these artists relate to Beckmann, and what do they have in common with him? What are their positions toward the Third Reich, politics, and their situation as exiles? Beckmann was fifty-eight years old when he conceived Les Artistes mit Gemüse. The other men pictured were much younger. All four were isolated from both the Dutch art world and the German exile community, and none of them was active in any antifascist resistance movement. Despite these shared factors, the distinct aesthetic beliefs of these individuals help us understand what Beckmann’s intentions might have been.

Although Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart’s aesthetic program was opposed to Beckmann’s, who was skeptical about pure abstract art, he kept himself, as did Beckmann, aloof from politics and was concerned mainly with defending his aesthetic position. In contrast to Vordemberge-Gildewart, the Berlin painter Otto Herbert Fiedler executed more conservative naturalistic portraits. By choosing these two painters for his group portrait, Beckmann illuminated two modes of painting decisively different from his own concerns with creating a transcendental world. His reference to both abstract art and naturalistic painting can thus be understood as a means of emphasizing his outsider status in relation to Modernism, stressing his belief in individualism.
The German philosopher and writer Wolfgang Frommel had more in common with Beckmann. Between 1933 and 1935, Frommel headed a radio program in Nazi Germany called “Vom Schicksal des Deutschen Geistes” (“About the Fate of the German Spirit”). Like Beckmann, he privileged spiritual values, which he attempted to set against the visible world of National Socialism. Yet he also shared beliefs with the Nazis: he defended nationalism and Nazi ideals of the simple life; he mythologized the state and history in irrational ways; and he took a stance against progressiveness and modernity. Frommel is the most prominent exile depicted in this painting, a point made visible by means of the golden frame surrounding his head. With Frommel’s portrait, Beckmann certainly references the significance of spiritual values that he shared with the philosopher.

The painting’s unnaturalistic color, simple shapes, rough brushwork, and distorted perspective distinguish *Les Artistes mit Gemüse* as clearly indebted to a Modernist idiom. Yet typologically, Beckmann drew upon traditions of Northern European 17th-century group portraiture (exemplified, for example, in Peter Paul Rubens’ *Self-Portrait in the Circle of His Mantova Friends*), thus taking up a convention specific to his place of exile. This historicist appropriation can be seen as an attempt to assimilate with the new Northern culture, although not with contemporary art as it was then practiced in Holland. Northern 17th-century art had been held in high esteem in the history of German collecting since the founding of the German Reich in 1871. Both Dutch art of the 17th-century and Italian Renaissance art were seen as symbols of power and intellectualism, an appreciation that continued well into the Third Reich, as Hitler’s selections for the envisioned Linz Museum demonstrate. Beckmann was certainly aware of this trend. Although he himself may never have intended any associations between his group portrait and the aesthetic preferences of the Nazis, Hitler’s all-encompassing politicization of art made
possible such parallels. Nevertheless, Dutch 17th-century group portraiture not only was a genre highly valued by the Nazis and significant to Beckmann’s place of exile, but it also encompassed metaphysical notions such as immaterial presence and spiritual content that were at the very center of Beckmann’s intellectual interests.

With Les Artistes mit Gemüse, Beckmann constructed a discourse that ambiguously alternates between creating a fictitious narrative that makes visual references to pictorial traditions of 17th-century Holland and representing independent German exiles in a Modernist idiom. Beckmann’s dual demand on narrative and representation, group and individual, historicism and Modernism, illuminates both his perception of the unavoidable penetration of political realities into the aesthetic realm and his desire for a utopian practice of Modernism in which art, detached from politics, “is the mirror of God embodied by man.”8


On July 19, 1937, Adolf Hitler infamously called for a cleansing war against Modernist art, denouncing it as degenerate based on its distorting depiction of the visible world, its elitism resulting from its alleged inaccessibility, its internationalism, and its purportedly Jewish and Bolshevik creators and distributors.


See ibid., 305.
