

Hannes Beckmann (1909–1977). Dessau – Prague – New York

This PhD thesis is dedicated to an exceptional, though still forgotten personality, an artist of German descent, Hannes Beckmann [1909–1977]. A graduate of Germany's Bauhaus, he was one of the refugees fleeing Nazism to Czechoslovakia, and among many other achievements, he later became the director of the photography department of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Through his work, he fulfilled avant-garde ideas on the synthesis of artistic fields: he was a painter, stage designer, art theorist and pedagogue, but also a creator of abstract objects moving along the boundaries of minimalistic and kinetic constructions.

His fate in life and created body of work began gaining a clearer form in the framework of research on visual artists, who found sanctuary in interwar Czechoslovakia from demagogic political systems. Until that time, Hannes Beckmann had been utterly unknown to Czech art history and elsewhere. This is seen in the absence of his name in Czech technical literature, but also because he was never mentioned even in publications published by the Bauhaus with which he had been involved for some time. There was only sketchy information on his pedagogical and artistic work in the area of Op-Art (optical art) from the 1960s to 1970s in the United States of America, mentioned in catalogs issued in support of Beckmann's exhibitions organized there. For this reason, this monograph focused mainly on the previous period, broken down by localities of the artist's main work – Dessau, Prague and New York.

The historical introduction of this work generally recaps several key topics having a profound impact on Beckmann's life. It outlines events mainly concerning Central Europe, which led to the Second World War, as well as the issue of Czech and German cohabitation, which influenced the development from the 1930s to the post-war years in Czechoslovakia. It then discusses contexts leading to the closing of the artistic avant-garde school Bauhaus, and the support given to refugees fleeing Nazism, especially the emigration of artists and their opportunities to engage in local cultural and political life. At the conclusion, events are mentioned that culminated after the war in chauvinism of Czech society, national purges and the leaning towards communist ideology.

The next parts of the PhD thesis, as indicated, are broken down by the places where Beckmann created and worked. Dessau is about the artist's studying and

experimental period at the Bauhaus, where he met personalities who had an influence on his thinking and artistic creation for the rest of his life. Rokytová, in bringing into closer view the Bauhaus environment in Dessau and the political connotations at the time of Beckmann's studies here. It helped explain the Bauhaus influences and starting points in Beckmann's consequent creation. Prague, another main topic of this work, attempts to reconstruct the period of Beckmann's life spent in Czechoslovakia. The author observes his work not only based on artistic fields and theoretical findings, but also dealing with thematic relations in political, social and cultural events. For Beckmann, Prague symbolizes survival, whose price involved the feelings of artistic isolation and limitation in inventive, creative development. Personal tragedy and the wrongs caused by the war were the reasons why Beckmann turned his back on this period and never spoke about it much. As the author explains in the chapter New York, life became just the opposite for Beckmann in the United States of America. He won recognition not only as an artist, but also for his abilities as a pedagogue and theorist. The topic was explored mainly in ways relating to the Prague period.

The summary of the work attempts to explain whether and in what manner in Beckmann's work did his fate as a refugee manifest itself in those culturally, socially and economically differing areas. The consequences of such influences can be observed to a certain extent in the artist's selected correspondences, or in the catalog of visual art works broken down by locality, discipline and date. Beckmann's creation leading from the 1950s to Op-Art, and especially from 1970 to 1977, was not the main subject of research of this PhD thesis. Neither is his earlier creative period explored thoroughly for this reason. Therefore, in the catalog of works, only a selection of this creation has been reproduced, and it is not a comprehensive review (see Selection of Correspondences and Catalog of Works).

The topic of this work shows signs of a timeless international overlap, not only by the artist's interdisciplinary flexibility and his first-hand experience with emigration. Mainly Beckmann's personal correspondences with such figures as Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Lily Klee, Hilla Rebay or Johannes Urzidil, make it clear that in such circles, he was considered an important artist whose work and ideas however were practically unknown in Europe in consequence of history. Thanks to the Czech Science Foundation's financial support of the project, it was possible to create a comprehensive appendix comprised not only of these selected correspondences, but also of Beckmann's theoretical texts never before published, or

at least never published in Czech or English. Everything is enhanced by explanatory commentary, specific data and links or biographical information. The documents clarify the problems and circumstances of the time influencing the creative environment in Europe and in the United States of America in the 1930s to 1970s.

The PhD thesis attempts to point out the contradictions in Beckmann's life, given by the political dictate and national prejudices, which had an enormous impact on his creation. After nearly ten years of research, it can be said that from a "mere" name among a series of artist emigrants, it was eventually possible to illustrate solid outlines of Beckmann's identity and creative work.

Beckmann's life and work and his fate metaphorically reflect the dramatic history of the 20th century: the economic consequences of World War I, as well as nationalist and racial ideologies which divided families and society, led to the tragic outcome of the antagonistic alignment of Germanness and Jewishness, to Nazi and Communist dictatorships; to post-war chauvinism; to the sacrifice of millions, often in futile attempts at mass escape ... Traditional art was emptied of meaning and the avant-garde searched intensely for new forms. But gradually their radicalism was ever more ostracised and finally authoritatively eliminated as „degenerate“ or „bourgeois“. Hannes Beckmann also lived through all this, yet he succeeded in maintaining his personal integrity to which his artistic work inseparably belonged.

While the chapter about Dessau in Beckmann's life resounds like a clear light of his future artistic development, the Prague period was a dark time, which interrupted this direction as it did Beckmann's optimism. Despite this, he succeeded in capitalizing in New York on all of his experience so that by the end of his life, he received due recognition.