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Beckmann's Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery

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Max Beckmann (1884-1950),
Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, 1917, German. Oil on canvas. 149.2 x 126.7 cm.
Courtesy of The Saint Louis Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri
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Even before the turn of the century, Max Beckmann (1884-1950) was one of Germany's most promising young artists. He was precocious: his first major painting was *Self-portrait With Soap Bubbles*, completed when he was just 14 years old. In retrospect—considering the two world wars that would mark his life—the vanitas theme seems prescient, although the symbolism could just as well have been inspired by a private adolescent angst. Whatever the case, Max Beckmann would leave his mark on 20th-century painting. Born in Leipzig, he began his studies at the art academy in Weimar when he was 16. Three years later he was in Paris, studying with Julius Meier-Graefe and three years after that, in 1906, he had his first exhibit, at the Berlin Secession. That was also the year of his first marriage, to Minna Tube (whom he would divorce some 20 years later to marry Mathilde von Kaulbach). He was 22. Europe was heady with artistic ferment. He drank in the work of such moderns as Cézanne, van Gogh, Munch, and Louis Corinth; he went to Florence and studied Michelangelo, Rubens, and Rembrandt; he looked at the Romantics, principally Delacroix and Gericault. But he was especially taken with Impressionism, Symbolism, and the work of Luca Signorelli.

Beckmann's life, however, changed drastically with the onset of World War I. From being an "objective" recorder of such local disasters as the sinking of the Titanic and the earthquake at Messina, he became an actual participant in a catastrophe that was worldwide. In 1914, now 30, he joined the German army as a member of the medical corps. The carnage broke him. Within a year he had received a medical discharge for a severe "nervous breakdown" marked by "hallucinations and grotesque nightmares."

If the brutal experience changed Beckmann's perception of the world, it also resulted in profound changes in his work. Bright colors gave way to almost monochromatic canvases. Perspective—at least traditional notions of perspective—disappeared. The picture plane was flattened. Space was compressed until it almost disappeared.

Human figures were distorted. Black outlines appeared. Scenes were often grotesque, subjects gruesome. But his draftsmanship and sense of design remained intact, as did his chromatic harmonies, even when the colors were subdued. In short, Beckmann came out of the war with a changed view of reality but with a clear sense of how he would present it. All the influences of his life to that point seemed to be funneled through his brush and thence released into the remainder of his life's work.

Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery is an early example of this change. Completed in 1917, shortly after his discharge, it was one of the first paintings he did after his war experience. It is based on an incident recorded in the New Testament (John is the only evangelist to report it), but it is not a literal rendering. The major colors are the primary colors—red, blue, yellow—but they are used sparingly. Most of the painting, and in particular the figure of Christ (larger than life-size in comparison with the other figures), is pale and monochromatic. Black is prominent. Space has all but disappeared; all of the figures are crowded forward. Perspective is like nothing previously seen: there are two points of view, one from below looking upward, the other from above looking downward. The result is that the viewer is pulled simultaneously in opposite directions. The opposition also dramatizes the moral dilemma that is the subject of the painting. The vertical format and the elongated figure of the centrally placed Christ sounds gothic echoes. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Christ figure, which dominates not only the picture space, but the psychological space as well, bears the facial features of Beckmann himself—or at least are remarkably similar to those of a self-portrait. It has also been suggested that the female figure has the features of his wife Minna, from whom he was by then separated.

With this painting, considered a critical work of his post-World War period, Beckmann's earthquakes and shipwrecks ceased being vicarious experiences. The tragedy limned on the canvas was the tragedy limned on his soul. The result is somehow horrifying and hopeful at the same time: to name the experience—in this case to embody it in pigment—is to master it. In later work, Beckmann returned to color, although, in their linear aspects, his works remained austere. His human figures took on the forms of clowns and kings, as well as acrobats. During the 1930s a world war once again overtook him. Along with hundreds of others, he was denounced by the German government as a "degenerate artist." Forced to give up his official teaching posts as well, Beckmann fled to Amsterdam. In 1947, he arrived in the United States, where he taught at Washington University in St Louis and, from 1949, at the Art School of the Brooklyn Museum. He died suddenly shortly thereafter. He was 66.