



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the Max Beckmann exhibition
at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid
on 24 October 2018**

For aficionados of art and Madrid, a visit to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum is an absolute must. I love both art and this city, so I am delighted to be here this evening. Thank you very much indeed for inviting me!

In the online advertisements and posters for this exhibition, we see the protagonist's face in "Carnival (Pierette and Clown)", a double-portrait of the artist and his wife Quappi painted in 1925. Beckmann had recently fallen in love, his work was enjoying international success, and he had been appointed professor at the Städelschule Academy of Fine Arts in Frankfurt. These were optimistic times. Writing about "Carnival (Pierette and Clown)" in a letter to his wife, he said: "Our portrait of the bride will be beautiful. I think constantly of you and our picture."

When the Nazis took over, this world was rocked. Beckmann was dismissed from his job and was no longer allowed to exhibit his work. As he noted in his diary, he still hoped to be able to "withstand the insanity of the day", to persevere somehow, and to escape repression by going into inner exile. The first part of this exhibition deals with this creative period.

On 19 July 1937, Beckmann's world collapsed entirely. That was the day an exhibition opened in Munich – an exhibition that we are ashamed of to this day. The Nazis called their propaganda show "Degenerate Art". I mention the name so that you will know which exhibition I mean. Otherwise, I share Beckmann's view. He believed it was important, and I quote, "not to keep using these asses' ridiculous name ourselves. It's actually called German art." Incidentally, he proudly and defiantly underlined the word "German" in this letter.

But the Nazis did not only deprive those who thought and created art differently from them of their artistic freedom – no, even their own

citizenship was denied to them. The aesthetics of Cubism, Expressionism, New Objectivity or Dada did not fit with the new regime's totalitarian concept of humankind.

Artists such as Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka and Käthe Kollwitz were vilified – I am ashamed to utter the following words, but I will deliberately quote from the speech by the president of the so-called Reich Chamber of Fine Arts at the opening of the 1937 exhibition – as “the spawn of insanity, insolence, ineptitude and degeneracy”.

All of the artists damned in this way were marginalised and persecuted. Over 20,000 works by some 1400 artists were confiscated. Many of them have now been forgotten, eradicated from art history and lost forever.

Max Beckmann became a major target of Nazi cultural policy. Several of his works, including “Carnival (Pierette and Clown)”, were exhibited at the Nazi propaganda show. In total, 590 of Beckmann's works were confiscated from German museums, forcibly expropriated and in some cases burned.

From that day on, inner exile was no longer an option. In her memoirs, Beckmann's wife wrote: “We had only one choice – to leave Germany immediately.” The following day, the Beckmanns fled to the Netherlands. This marked the start of their external exile, and thus the second part of this exhibition.

Exile would become the most difficult time in Max Beckmann's life – but also his most productive creative period. Isolation led him to work more ferociously, as if he were defending himself against being uprooted. In a letter, he wrote that it was “a truly grotesque time, filled with work, persecution by the Nazis, bombs, hunger, and more work”.

This experience left its mark on the artist and his art. Beckmann's art truly became an “underground movement”, as his patron Stephan Lackner noted.

The war finally ended in the defeat of Nazi Germany. However, Beckmann did not return to Germany. He went into exile again, this time of his own volition, to the United States. Thus began the last phase of his work and of your exhibition.

Without a doubt, Max Beckmann is one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Going beyond Expressionism, he is one of the most important representatives of New Objectivity, who shaped new and modern forms of expression in art. With his figurative and mythological style and large-scale triptychs, Beckmann became an icon of modernity.

The works curated by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum for this impressive exhibition enable us to imagine just how much the path of emigration is paved by the feeling of loss and of being lost – by emotional uprooting, language barriers and a loss of material belongings. In many cases, those who managed to escape into exile did so with only the clothes on their backs.

Beckmann's searing exploration of his own story of fleeing and exile gets under our skin. And inevitably, it reminds us of the present. Artists, intellectuals, academics and journalists are currently being persecuted on Europe's doorstep. Many of them have found refuge in Spain and Germany.

The right to asylum, the protection of those fleeing war, violence and political persecution, is an undertaking made jointly by the international community following the injustice and terror of the past.

And for us Germans, it is more than that – it is part of the responsibility that arises from our past, and under which no line can ever be drawn!

"Exile Figures" is a fitting name for Beckmann's work. And the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum is a fitting venue for this exhibition. As Minister of Culture, Jorge Semprún, the great literary figure and resistance fighter, was crucial in bringing the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum to Madrid.

The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism in 2003, when he gave a speech to us in the German Bundestag on his own experiences, the importance of remembering and the anti-fascist resistance, stands out clearly in my memory. He also spoke about Europe's role in ensuring that the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century never happened again.

This exhibition reminds us of Europe's origins. And it reminds us to protect what we have achieved as regards the European peace project during decades of work. For many people, unfortunately, the most important benefit of this united Europe, namely 70 years of peace, is fading into the background or even being completely forgotten. For young people in particular, it may seem as if this peace is a matter of course, as if this is simply how things are. Those who visit this exhibition will become painfully aware that things certainly can be different – and they will feel profoundly grateful for the peace and indeed friendship that we experience with one another in Europe today. That is just one reason why I hope a large number of people will visit this exhibition.

Many people played a role in bringing about this wonderful exhibition. I would like to thank the President of the Board, Minister of Culture José Guirao, and the Vice-President of the Board, Baroness Carmen Thyssen Bornemisza and kindly ask that they pass on my

thanks to all those involved. In particular, I would like to thank Mayen Beckmann, Max Beckmann's granddaughter, who is here with us today. Her constant work on behalf of her grandfather's estate is what made this exhibition possible in the first place.

I look forward to discovering the exhibition with you now. Thank you!