

Barbara and Erhard Göpel: A Convergence

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The history of one of the most exemplary catalogues raisonnés in the area of classic modernism had its start in the late 1920s. Erhard Göpel, a young art historian from Leipzig who had actually dedicated himself to ancient art and, already as a fourteen-year-old, absorbed expert knowledge at C. G. Borner, an art dealership specializing in prints and drawings, was captivated by the work of Max Beckmann. It is not known exactly when the fire was sparked. Göpel may have seen the Beckmann retrospective organized by Gustav Hartlaub at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1928. Four years later, he made the artist's acquaintance in Paris and visited him at his Berlin studio in 1934. Under the new regime in Germany, Beckmann had lost his professorship at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. The impressive Beckmann space that Ludwig Justi had installed on the upper level of the Museum der Gegenwart in the Kronprinzenpalais, a branch of the Nationalgalerie, had also been successively dismantled by the time Beckmann and his fellow artists were ultimately denounced in 1937. The first of Göpel's texts on Beckmann was published in 1934, on the artist's fiftieth birthday, in the *NEUE LEIPZIGER ZEITUNG*. It was the sole public tribute to a painter who just a few years earlier had been celebrated as a genius. Göpel wrote at the time: "When the sixty-year-old looks back at 1934, there will be no doubt that he would again give shape to today for tomorrow."¹ The author of these lines could scarcely have anticipated that Beckmann would be living in exile in the Netherlands from 1937 on or how much he himself would be involved in the artist's fate. How right he was in presuming that Beckmann would shape "today for tomorrow." In Frankfurt the artist had already started his triptych *Departure* (1934), a mythical prophecy of displacement and violence on a previously unknown scale.

Some seven years after Beckmann passed away, Göpel wrote an essay on the artist's life and work for the Propyläen-Verlag publishing house.² He was among the first, following the years of defamation, to reintroduce Beckmann into the public consciousness. Together with the artist's widow, Mathilde Q. Beckmann, then residing in the United States, he negotiated the publication of the artist's diaries and was engaged with the idea of a catalogue raisonné, a task he proposed be undertaken by the Max Beckmann Gesellschaft, which

he had co-founded. Göpel had written to the artist in the US several times, as Beckmann's wife confirmed in a letter from 1951 while also underscoring the old, friendly bond between Beckmann and his "Eckermann." "Neither I nor Beckmann," she wrote, "have forgotten the 'A.-Zeit' [time in Amsterdam]—and I hope and believe you sense and understand that, even if it was only greetings and imaginary letters that were sent to Eckermann!"³

In 1948, three years after the end of the war, the forty-two-year-old Göpel was hired at his first permanent job, as an editor at the Prestel Verlag publishing house in Munich, which was to become his adopted hometown. A brief time later, the "A.-Zeit" began to catch up with him. The photograph that Peter Keetman took of Göpel in front of a Munich window display in 1954 (fig. 1) seems to illustrate the question that began circulating at the time about his role as a Sonderbeauftragter (special representative) for the so-called Führermuseum in Linz.⁴ When Ernst Buchner, the freshly reappointed but controversial director general of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, wanted to hire Göpel, the German Ministry of Culture and the boardroom of several newspapers, including the *SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG* and the *FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG*, received copies of Göpel's telegram to Martin Bormann from April 1943,⁵ in which he proposed acquiring the looted French Jewish Schoss family collection for Linz. As a result, not only was Göpel's hoped-for employment at the Staatsgemäldesammlungen permanently suspended; the newspapers for which he regularly wrote also ceased to engage him further. Göpel was nonetheless apparently able to convince a few of his critics of his innocence and a brief time later felt "personally and politically" rehabilitated, as he wrote in an unpublished text.⁶ What was he accused of?

1 ERHARD GÖPEL, *Max Beckmann: Berichte eines Augenzeugen*, ed. Barbara Göpel (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), p. 11.

2 Cf. ERHARD GÖPEL, "Max Beckmann—Mensch und Werk," *ibid.*, pp. 12–35.

3 Mathilde Q. Beckmann to Erhard Göpel, January 26, 1951, estate of Barbara Göpel, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich. Published in *Max Beckmann: Beiträge 2019*, Hefte des Max Beckmann Archivs 16, ed. Christian Lenz (2019), p. 2.

4 The photograph by Peter Keetman (1916–2005) was made for the book *München: Lebenskreise einer Stadt*, text by Erhard Göpel, photography by Peter Keetman (Lindau, 1955).

5 In 1957 (?), in an undated letter to the then director of the culture section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Karl Korn, Erhard Göpel suspected that the Jewish journalist Susanne Carvin, who had returned from exile, along with the SPD politician and resistance fighter Waldemar von Knoeringen had distributed the telegram. Cf. the typewritten copy of the letter, estate of Barbara Göpel, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.

6 Cf. typewritten manuscript, 14 pages, undated, *ibid.*

In 1939 the art historian Göpel (b. 1906 in Leipzig) was drafted as a Sonderführer (special leader) in the salary grade—though not the service rank—of a captain in an interpreter platoon of an infantry replacement battalion. With that, his art-historical career appeared to be temporary ended. In 1941 the art historian Robert Oertel, likewise a Leipzig native and a friend of Göpel's then working, under Hans Posse for the planned museum in Linz, at the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, recommended him as an expert for Old Dutch art. Posse was no longer able to look after this area himself due to health reasons. On April 16, 1942, Göpel was released from the army and starting May 1, ordered to the enterprise headquarters in Dresden. The work he now began under Posse's direction and, after the latter's death, under that of Hermann Voss, for the Special Commission Linz at the Reichskommissar for the occupied Netherlandish area in the Department for Special Questions of Art Acquisition in The Hague, was more than problematic.

The surviving documents are a windfall for reconstructing this unprecedented undertaking, although important questions remain unanswered. Birgit Schwarz is to be credited for her research rectifying the hitherto prevailing myth about the scope of the museum project. She set the proportions of this enterprise on a realistic scale.⁷ Considerably more difficult is forming an opinion about the people who worked as privileged functionaries on an ambitious museum project, personally run by Hitler, that was essentially based on art theft. From the outset, the planned museum in Linz was a product of a war that, because of its racist dynamic, released Jewish bourgeois holdings of art as booty, especially in the west of Europe. Objects that a regulated art market could only have acquired in the rarest of cases suddenly became available. Artworks of the highest caliber could be confiscated on the basis of German racial laws and their owners blackmailed, expelled, or deported. Among those competing for the spoils were not just high-ranking National Socialists. The loot soon also fell into the hands of the "Aryanized" and long-established art trade, which was particularly revitalized in the Netherlands. Under the absolute power of the so-called Führer's prerogative, the Linz project aimed at securing the best works.

Göpel's entry into the service of Hitler's vision of building a museum in Linz to house art of the nineteenth century and the Old Masters gave the thirty-six-year-old art historian a high degree of privilege. His task was to travel through the Netherlands as well as, beginning August 26, 1943, France and Belgium and acquire first-class works of art using enormous

sums made available by Hitler via the party headquarters led by Martin Bormann. His credentials included above all his work as an assistant to the great scholar and connoisseur Frits Lugt, who knew every collector and dealer in the area of Old Masters in Europe. There Göpel had worked in particular on the cataloguing of Netherlandish drawings from the Louvre.⁸ He spoke, among other languages, fluent Dutch and had graduated with a dissertation, supervised by Theodor Hetzer, titled *Ein Bildnisauftrag für van Dyck* (A portrait commission for Van Dyck).

Preserved in several archives, the correspondence between Dresden and Göpel's office in The Hague reveals how this art-historical procurement office perceived itself. In contrast to the gamblers in the entourage of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, dealers like Karl Haberstock, and the racist functionaries around Alfred Rosenberg, the Special Commission Linz apparently saw itself as an art historically serious enterprise that solely fulfilled Hitler's assignment to procure a qualitatively superior art collection for the museum planned in the so-called Ostmark. This becomes evident in a November 23, 1942 memorandum Göpel penned to his superior in Holland, General Commissioner for Special Purposes Fritz Schmidt. Addressing the article on art theft in Holland "What a Country to Plunder!"⁹ which had been published in the flyer *Voice of the Netherlands*, Göpel wrote: "Truth and exaggeration are mixed here, but even so, the majority of facts is correct. From that perspective, great importance must be placed on a clear and clean handling of the purchases."¹⁰

Under the umbrella of a building project based on racist crimes, the practical art historical expertise was raised to a neutral realm. One scanned both what the market offered and the confiscated Jewish property without any particular scruple, subsuming the current transactions under the general history of violence concerning artworks, which itself was treated like a given and irrevocable fact of the balance of power. Perhaps one recalled Napoleon and his European and Egyptian booty for the Louvre in Paris. Some ninety percent of the official correspondence discusses the quality, the authenticity, possible sellers, and the price of the works on offer, mostly derived from the art trade, which had been revived by the Special Commission.

One "rescued" oneself in work-by-the-book oriented toward a higher ideal and smoothly served the system, operating fluently under its regulations. Neither Posse, who was already terminally ill at the time of Göpel's appointment; his successor, Hermann Voss; nor the employees Gottfried Reimer and Robert Oertel were committed National Socialists but, rather, conservative art historians who saw themselves as apolitical.

When Göpel arrived in Holland and moved into his office at the former Czechoslovakian embassy in The Hague, he was surrounded by military and secret service command posts. He dealt with the Reichskommissar of the occupied Netherlands, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, and was subordinate to General Commissioner for Special Purposes Schmidt and, after his unexplained death, the SS member Wilhelm Ritterbusch. The brutal occupation power immediately began interning the Jewish population at and successively deporting them from the Westerbork transit camp. The task of viewing and acquiring artworks emotionlessly, preferably at a distance via middlemen or agencies, might have succeeded while at a desk in Dresden. Göpel, however, was directly confronted with the practices of the SD (Security Service) and the SS (Protective Echelon) on site. The reality exposed the lie of an unpolitical art-historical task and was further fraught by old friends and acquaintances who repeatedly approached Göpel and the Special Commission with pleas to help their Jewish relatives and acquaintances. When, in a letter from January 19, 1943, Mathilde Q. Beckmann asked Göpel to do something for the interned Jewish woman Ilse Leembruggen, she was clearly speaking of mortal danger, not the euphemistic work camps, and added: "It is to you and this woman that [Max Beckmann] owes his life in these difficult years."¹¹ Göpel saw himself as a man of culture, as an homme de lettres, as his friend Günther Busch referred to him.¹² In his role as "Sonderbeauftragter of the Führer" he was on the one hand a knowledgeable and successful buyer of top-ranking Old Master works that mostly derived from Jewish property. He was sensitive when it came to matters of art, extraordinarily ambitious, and, on the other hand, clearly aware of the regime's brutality.

As a young man, Göpel had been engaged in an advisory role for typographical and creative tasks by the intellectual department store owner, Zionist, and publisher Salman

7 Cf. BIRGIT SCHWARZ, *Hitlers Museum: Die Fotoalben der Gemäldegalerie Linz: Dokumente zum "Führermuseum,"* (Vienna et al., 2004).

8 Cf. J. F. HEIJBROEK, *Frits Lugt 1884-1970: Living for Art: A Biography* (Paris and Bussum, 2012). On Erhard Göpel, see esp. pp. 375-78.

9 Cf. *Voice of the Netherlands*, vol. 2, no. 5, September 19, 1942.

10 Erhard Göpel to General Commissioner for Special Purposes Fritz Schmidt, November 23, 1943, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

11 Mathilde Q. Beckmann to Erhard Göpel, January 19, 1943, Erhard Göpel Papers, Correspondence, Letters to E. Göpel, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

12 Cf. GÜNTHER BUSCH, "Nachwort," in ERHARD GÖPEL, *Max Beckmann: Berichte eines Augenzeugen*, ed. Barbara Göpel (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 223-28, here p. 226.

Schocken and worked together with his architect, Erich Mendelsohn.¹³ Göpel was thus intimately familiar with the advantages of the “Jewish intelligentsia” and their cosmopolitan thinking. When he returned to occupied Holland in 1943, the Jewish collectors and art dealers whom Göpel, almost entirely through Frits Lugt, had personally met and from whom he profited intellectually were directly threatened. And he now was returning as a henchman of this inhuman regime, even in the thankful eyes of his great hero, Max Beckmann.

Göpel’s conscience apparently prompted him to employ as many Jewish people as possible for the Special Commission. At times over forty Jewish experts worked on his staff, including such prominent names as Max J. Friedländer and Vitale Bloch. Friedländer’s rescue is, however, attributed to the protection of Göring, who had a great interest in Friedländer’s expert assessments, many of which he had made for Alois Miedl. Miedl in turn split Holland’s most prestigious Jewish art dealership—that of Jacques Goudstikker—with Göring in a simulated forced sale. This left the craftsmen, conservators, frame builders, and their families in a precarious position; they were more difficult to retain and could at any time be replaced by their “Aryan” Dutch counterparts.¹⁴ On October 18, 1943, Göpel had to explain the conspicuous number of Jewish employees to Seyss-Inquart, SS-Brigadeführer Erich Nauman, and the director of the Department for the Jewish Question, Sturmbannführer Wilhelm Zöpf, among others. Göpel had succeeded in keeping a large number of the people listed by name and address in the minutes and even getting them exempted from wearing the Star of David. Even so, with a stroke of a pencil, other people were also released for deportation and so-called mixed marriages divided.¹⁵

Göpel consulted with art dealers on how to obtain a visa in exchange for art and to negotiate emigrating together with one’s relatives and household goods. The art dealer Nathan Katz, with his excellent connections to Dutch

collectors, offered his services to locate important artworks in Switzerland and to alert Göpel about them in Holland. Göpel and Voss worked toward organizing Katz’s departure for Switzerland along with twenty-five family members.¹⁶ The former helped a large number of people to trade pictures for exit travel documents or succeeded in placing them under the protection of the “Führerauftrag” (Führer commission). Göpel was more than aware of the plight of the Jewish sellers. Time and again, he was able to delay deportation dates in this “trade,” even attaining exemptions from wearing the star to the extent that a few people were completely struck from the list. The deportation of the art dealer Abraham Nijstad and his family, for instance, was repeatedly postponed, until, in April 1943, they finally succeeded in obtaining an indefinite release.¹⁷ With information provided by his superior Voss, Göpel succeeded in getting a Swiss visa for the art dealer Pieter de Boer and his Jewish wife, Cornelia, along with her parents, David and Berta Pressburger, in exchange for a painting by Salomon von Ruysdael, *The Halt before the Inn*. De Boer also offered four pictures by Jan Bruegel the Elder in exchange for his former business partner Otto Busch, who, together with his wife, Frieda, was to be deported on September 10, 1943. Göpel had already asked Voss to speed things up on September 6, 1943. In his sentence, “*Then I can at least achieve that Busch and his wife remain in Holland,*”¹⁸ we sense the sympathy that one, for good reason,

would otherwise forego under such circumstances. “*My arguments,*” Göpel wrote later, “*could never be of a human nature, and I always had to state how useful these people were for the supply of significant artworks.*”¹⁹ In the writing of art history, opinions differ about his involvement. The curator Beatrice von Bormann has argued for taking the larger context into account:

*Göpel’s double role during the war and his significance for Beckmann are what make him such an exceptionally interesting character. It does not do him justice to either decline to mention his position during the war or to demonize him for it, as has been done in the past.*²⁰

Living in exile in Amsterdam from 1937 on, the artist Max Beckmann, was extremely grateful to Göpel. The latter had twice rescued him from being drafted into military service, which would have devastated the artist because he suffered from a severe heart condition. Beckmann also appreciated their many conversations in front of his pictures, which demonstrated to him that Göpel was one of the few people who understood his artistic intentions. Yet Beckmann was also aware of Göpel’s activity and even visited him several times at his office in The Hague, where delivered artworks always stood waiting to be evaluated. Göpel, whom Beckmann referred to with curious pseudonyms in his Amsterdam diary, not only transported the artist’s works to Germany but also bought paintings, drawings, and graphics from Beckmann’s studio at Rokin 85 and thus contributed to safeguarding his existence. For him, Beckmann was the leading artist of his time.

Beckmann painted Göpel in 1944 (fig. 2). We could regard the portrait as a courtesy piece, or at least as a commissioned work done out of gratitude, if it weren’t for something that deeply troubled the sitter himself. Here, Beckmann held a mirror up to his friend into which he would probably have preferred not to gaze. Beckmann initially drew Göpel on January 23, 1944, to the music of Maurice Ravel, as he confided to his diary. Prior to that, as he further noted, he had shown Göpel “*some Faust 5,*” which, as he put it, Göpel had to “*chew through laboriously.*”²¹ Thus, from the very

13 Cf. the archival materials on Erhard Göpel and Salman Schocken, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

14 The Jewish conservators Hartog Cohen and Lion Morpurgo along with their families, were deported to Theresienstadt on January 18, 1944. There they set up a workshop to restore pieces for the Special Commission. Cf. letter from Sturmbannführer Wilhelm Zöpf, January 14, 1944, copy from the Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), estate of Barbara Göpel, Max Beckmann Archive, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.

15 Cf. memorandum about the meeting, October 18, 1943, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

16 “I hereby confirm that the painting by Rembrandt, *Portrait of Roman*, will be transferred into the possession of the German Reich... as soon as the twenty-five members of the Katz family have left the territory of the German Reich. The prerequisite for this is that the picture be paid for with the assets of Nathan and Benjamin Katz, which are being made available until October 1, 1942.” Nathan Katz to Erhard Göpel, August 19, 1942, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

17 Abraham Nijstad, his wife, and their children survived the Holocaust. In the public debate, Göpel has been accused of exploiting the predicament and trading lives for information and works of art. The accusation fails to recognize, however, that Nijstad and his family (like others as well) only survived through their willingness to work as an agent for the Special Commission Linz. Whether this involvement in fact signified an effective collaboration by, for instance, Nijstad, remains the subject of future research. Problematising this “trade” between Nijstad as well as other Jewish people such as Max J. Friedländer (who also produced expert reports for Hermann Göring) and Göpel in ethical terms borders on the cynical. Göpel’s only means of helping Jews was the power of his office.

18 Erhard Göpel to Hermann Voss, September 6, 1943, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

19 Typewritten manuscript, 14 pages, undated, *ibid.*

20 BEATRICE VON BORMANN, “Decade in ‘Ironing Board Land’: Max Beckmann in Dutch Exile,” in *Max Beckmann: Exile in Amsterdam*, ed. Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, Christian Lenz, and Beatrice von Bormann, exh. cat. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (Munich, 2007), pp. 107–33, here p. 127.

21 MAX BECKMANN, *Tagebücher 1940–1950* (Munich, 1955), p. 68, entry from Sunday, January 23, 1944: “*zeigte ihm etwas Faust 5. Akt*—[the passage “*musste es mühsam fressen.*” is missing in the first edition.] *Dann zeichnete ich ihn noch unter Klängen von Ravel.*”

outset, the portrait has been closely linked with Beckmann's drawings to Goethe's *Faust: The Second Part of the Tragedy*.

We shouldn't assume that it was the form of the Faust drawings that Göpel was reluctant to take in. He was familiar with and admired Beckmann's style.²² What on the other hand was difficult for him to digest was relating the "Faust complex," and in particular Act Five, to himself and his activity. Göpel certainly must have grasped that he had made a pact with the devil; Beckmann had drawn nothing less into play. The fate of Philemon and Baucis was too reminiscent of the fate of the European Jews, of Göpel's ambivalent role in the theft of pictures when Faust calls out: "So you have turned deaf ears to me! I meant exchange, not robbery."²³ But in truth, Faust had commanded: "Go, then, and clear them from my sight!"²⁴—which Mephistopheles understood as an order to kill. The devil just doesn't make any compromises. In the portrait, Beckmann rendered Göpel in a manner typical of a short-sighted man who has taken off his glasses to examine the sheets he holds in his hand more closely. This apparently was the volume of *Faust* from the Bremer Presse on whose interleaved pages Beckmann had been drawing.²⁵

Göpel is shown at the moment in which he has sat upright again after viewing the sheets close-up and, startled by his atrocious discovery, harks inwardly. His realization is still reflected on his face; the red rising up from the armchair appears to underscore his agitation. We sense the contemplative shock in his eyes. His round face, his boyish physiognomy with the soft mouth, contrast sharply with the reserved functionary in a suit. Yet, although the picture indeed depicts real elements, it is an invention. Nothing points to a naturalistic portrait for which a photographically precise rendering of the person would suffice. And while the portrait manages without Beckmann's usual symbolic program—objects such as candles or plants indicating the unconscious chasms that Beckmann so liked to use to refer to the questionability of existence—an uncanny shadow nevertheless looms over the figure. Beckmann set it, heavy and bulky,

with legs crossed, in a comfortable armchair.²⁶ The legs are oddly misaligned, however, as if they cannot be kept still. Their almost dance-like position brings disquiet to the seated body and corresponds with the expression of the eyes. They gesturally assume the inwardly transferred terror that has struck into every limb of the young man's body. The represented person has no response to the message conveyed to him so recklessly. No self-confident plea echoes through the room. The soft, red child's mouth signals silence; whatever the figure is gazing at here, no comment is to be expected. For the intellectual Göpel, a classic portrait depicting solely the head as the site of thinking would have been an obvious choice. Beckmann, for good reason, chose an almost life-size picture. Why the monumentality? It was clear to Beckmann that, in Hitler's service, the person Erhard Göpel whom he esteemed had entered into a shadow empire from which he could never again escape, which would continue to burden him after what was even then, in 1944, the foreseeable end of the war. It was certain that the victor would call the regime and those who had served it to account. For that reason, Beckmann advocated for the whole person, showing him with all his contradictions, as an art historian alarmed by his incorrect engagement.

It would be too simple to claim that Beckmann was drawing our attention to a traitor of Faustian caliber. The picture's hidden message is rather a cautionary note, a helpful psychological insight, meant for his friend and not the general viewer. It is an unmistakable psychograph by the man who for Göpel was the greatest artist of the twentieth century, a work that he took home with him after the turmoil of the war and hung in his library (fig. 3). Two years before his death, and twenty years after the portrait had been painted, Göpel was still not over this view of his character. As he remarked in 1964: "To this day, I have still not come to grips with the painting."²⁷

On his business trips to Paris, where at the German embassy he had to discuss his acquisition travels in France and organizational matters, Göpel spoke briefly with a young, intelligent stenographer whom he apparently couldn't get out of his mind. After the war, while searching for publication opportunities, he ran into her unexpectedly at the editorial office of the freshly established weekly magazine *DIE ZEIT*. He couldn't have known at the time that she would one day complete his great project of authoring a comprehensively annotated catalogue raisonné of Beckmann's oeuvre. Who was this young woman?

Barbara Malwine Auguste was born on February 24, 1922, in the town of Arnshagen—whence her father, as public prosecutor, had been transferred—as the only child of Hans and August Elisabeth Sperling from Berlin. Her father was a high-ranking lawyer, her mother an educated and open-minded person, who prudently managed the household wherever her husband happened to be stationed. In January 1934 the Sperling family returned to Berlin. Some ten years later, in April 1944, their house was completely destroyed by a bomb. Fortunately, Barbara's father was serving in the army at the time, and she herself was in Paris. Her mother miraculously survived in a neighboring bunker. Even so, all their furniture, household goods, and family memorabilia were lost in the flames.

Despite this irrevocable loss, and although she made Munich her home from 1950 on—Berlin was doubtlessly the city that Barbara Göpel felt particularly attached to. Her mother took her on excursions in the surrounding region, especially to Potsdam to study the art and architecture with her, with the primary aim of furthering her daughter's education. Along with raising their daughter in a loving family environment, Barbara's parents instilled in her a traditional ethos exemplified by the precept upheld by the Prussian military commander Alfred von Schlieffen: "Avoid sticking out, give your all, and put substance above outward appearance." In the late nineteenth century, her grandfather Heinrich Sperling had been a well-known painter of animals. Famous for his depictions of dogs, he even received a commission to paint the portrait of the kaiser's dogs. His son Claus Sperling lived and worked as a pastor in Demnitz from 1937 until his death. He initially followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a noteworthy painter of animals and landscapes before turning to theology. As a member of the Confessing Church, he was briefly imprisoned by the National Socialists in 1937.

Barbara was eleven years old when the National Socialists came to power in 1933 and seventeen when World War II broke out in 1939. Given the mandatory, two-month labor service also required of women since the start of the war, her father secured her a position in occupied France. In May 1941 she went to Paris, where she worked as a stenographer at the Palais Beauharnais, which housed the German embassy. Built in the early eighteenth century and sumptuously furnished in the Empire style, the embassy is still today considered one of the world's most beautiful. The view from Barbara's room extended over the Tuileries to the Louvre with its magnificent art collections. It is easy to imagine that she, just barely nineteen, might have felt like a young noble lady of the manor here, had she not found herself in the midst of one of the most terrible wars in human history and in the capital of a country occupied by the Germans. The German embassy was the political center of the occupying power, and Otto Abetz, the

22 Erhard Göpel played an essential role in the printing of Beckmann's drawings to the Apocalypse. Interestingly enough, the Apocalypse was printed on the same handmade paper at the Bauerschen Giesserei typefoundry's print shop, in Frankfurt am Main, as the photo album Hitler submitted annually for the "Führermuseum" in Linz.

23 Faust in JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE, *Faust: A Tragedy*, part 2, act 5, trans. Walter Arndt, ed. Cyrus Hamlin (New York and London, 1976), p. 288, lines 11370–71.

24 Ibid., p. 286, line 11275.

25 Cf. MAX BECKMANN, *Tagebücher 1940–1950* (Munich, 1955), entry from June 17, 1943, note p. 410.

26 Werner Busch points out that in medieval iconography crossed legs were seen as a sign of a liar.

27 ERHARD GÖPEL and BARBARA GÖPEL, *Max Beckmann: Katalog der Gemälde*, vol. 1 (Bern, 1976), catalogue no. 660, p. 397.

Francophile ambassador and an admitted anti-Semite, was active in the plundering of Jewish property. At times the embassy was a warehouse of stolen artworks. Functionaries like Alfred Rosenberg, Bruno Lohse, Karl Haberstock, and also Barbara's future husband, Erhard Göpel, went in and out.²⁸

Among Barbara's friends at the time was the art historian Ursula Lampe, likewise nineteen, who taught German at the German Historical Institute in Paris. She introduced Barbara to Ernst Jünger, who took "Lämpchen" (little lamp), as he affectionately called Ursula, along with Barbara and the art historian Fritz Baumgart on several visits to his artist friend Ernst Wilhelm Nay, who was stationed in Le Mans. Jünger was one of the most prominent opponents of Hitler, whom he disdainfully named "Kniebolo" in his Paris diary.²⁹ In the fall of 1943, Barbara, as mentioned above, first encountered her future husband—with no flirting whatsoever or the slightest inkling of their later relationship. In connection with his official duties for the Special Commission Linz, Göpel had business at the German embassy and was on friendly terms with Jünger and Carlo Schmid, then stationed in Lille.³⁰ Even though very young and on the lowest level of service, the employees of the Reich in the Foreign Office didn't fail to notice the dramatic proceedings in Paris: the introduction of the yellow star for French Jews, the acceleration of deportations at Abetz's urging, the actions of the Résistance, and also the events on July 20, 1944, when the chief military commander Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel had the upper SS ranks in Paris arrested.³¹ While Barbara came from a family that sympathized with National Socialism—as a high-ranking lawyer her father was a member of the NSDAP—it is not known what she thought and felt during this period.

After having fled from the US troops in August 1944, Barbara, now twenty-two, worked at the naval hospital in Eutin until the summer of 1946, when she was serendipitously offered

a secretarial post at the weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT*, which had been published for the first time just that February. The paper's co-founder and editor-in-chief, Richard Tüngel, was impressed by his young and prudent colleague. Soon everyone in the editorial office, including her boss, was affectionately calling her "Spatz" (sparrow). Thirsty for knowledge, Barbara eagerly took in the broad range of topics covered by *DIE ZEIT*. Writing fascinated her, and she dreamed of becoming a journalist or even an author. Working under Tüngel was by all means a valuable learning experience; a controversial boss, he was known as "helpful and uncomfortable," "brilliant, contradiction personified, and [as having] an artistic temperament"³²—in short, a challenging figure. His working hours were unpredictable, and he expected his secretary to be permanently ready to take dictation. Even so, whenever her schedule allowed, Barbara would attend concerts; in her letters she enthused about the big names in music literature and had witnessed the great conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Sergiu Celibidache in action.

In 1950 Barbara married Erhard Göpel in Celle, where her parents were living at the time. Following a few intermediary stations, he had been engaged in Munich. From 1948 on he had lived in the home of Carola Roth, whom Beckmann knew personally from his time in Frankfurt am Main. The artist had also painted her in a double portrait with Maria Swarzenski, the wife of Georg Swarzenski, director of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt from 1906 to 1933.³³ Along with Ursula Lampe, Carola would become one of Barbara's most important confidantes. Leaving her job at *DIE ZEIT* and moving to Bavaria were not easy for her. Once the couple had found an apartment in a garden house in Schwabing, they first and foremost had to accommodate Göpel's library, consisting of several thousand volumes still stored in Leipzig. An avid book collector, Göpel's interests extended to typography and the characteristics of paper.

In addition to his work at Prestel Verlag, writing auction reviews, and following other art-historical interests, Göpel pursued several large projects in which he involved his sixteen-year-younger wife as an employee. He gave particular priority to reintroducing Beckmann, who had passed away in New York in 1950, into German art history. With permission from Mathilde Q. Beckmann, Göpel had succeeded in publishing Beckmann's diaries from 1940 to 1950. In 1951, the

year these important records went to press, he, together with Barbara Göpel, Carola Roth, Lilly von Schnitzler, Theo Grave, and Peter Beckmann, cofounded the first Max Beckmann Gesellschaft. For Göpel, Beckmann was the paramount artist of his time, and he transmitted his conviction and enthusiasm to his wife. Although Barbara had never met Beckmann (the artist passed away in 1950, the year she married), she became one of the leading connoisseurs of his oeuvre through her work on the catalogue raisonné, lending it fundamental shape. She understood Beckmann above all with her eye. It was fascinating to hear her speak about the artist's work. She was aided in her approach by the original paintings, drawings, and graphics that her husband had for the most part personally acquired in Amsterdam. These included the above-mentioned *Portrait of Erhard Göpel*, which Beckmann painted out of gratitude in 1944, as well as his *Self-Portrait in the Bar*, from 1942.³⁴ Up to Barbara's death, the latter work hung directly to the left of their fireplace, observing every visitor and at the same time placing them under the rigorous gaze of a relentless psychologist. Indeed, she closely monitored whether her guests noticed the picture or heedlessly turned their attention to something else. Her husband had acquired the picture at the artist's Amsterdam studio, despite Mathilde Q. Beckmann's resistance. It was her favorite self-portrait of her husband, and hence the acquisition led to a temporary disgruntlement, which, however, completely dissipated a short time later.³⁵

The Göpels harbored the same concerns about the rehabilitation and rediscovery of the artist Hans Purrmann, who lived in Montagnola, in the canton of Ticino. While paying a visit to Purrmann in 1955, during an educational trip through Italy—Barbara drove the VW beetle she'd bought back in Hamburg and dubbed "Pünktchen" (dot)—the couple acquired the landscape *Houses and Walls in Porto d'Ischia*, from that year, which is now in the collection of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The picture is closely linked with the death of Göpels' son, Thomas, born in 1952, who died in Munich during their Italy sojourn. In 1959 Barbara traveled for a longer

28 Alfred Rosenberg was a racial ideologue and with his Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR; Reichsleiter Rosenberg taskforce) the chief plunderer of Jewish property. Bruno Lohse, who had the rank of SS Obersturmführer, was the deputy director of the ERR and on the move for Göring's art lootings in France. Karl Haberstock was an art dealer and close advisor of Hitler's for his museum project in Linz.

29 ERNST JÜNGER, *Strahlungen Zweiter Teil: Das zweite Pariser Tagebuch*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart, n.d.), p. 11.

30 The Göpels remained friends with Carlo Schmid, one of the founding fathers of the German constitution and member of the SPD, even after the war.

31 Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel was a member of the German resistance and, following his failed suicide attempt, he was executed at Plötzensee Prison in 1944.

32 Description by Josef Müller-Marein, cited in: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_T%C3%B4ngel (last accessed May 18, 2020).

33 MAX BECKMANN, *Double Portrait of Frau Swarzenski and Carola Netter* (1923), catalogue no. 222, in the present volume. The painting is in the collection of the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

34 MAX BECKMANN, *Self-Portrait in the Bar* (1942), catalogue no. 620 in the present volume; since 2017 at the Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, as a bequest from Barbara Göpel.

35 In her unpublished diaries, Mathilde Q. Beckmann describes this—for her bitter—event, which led to a temporary falling out with Göpel. On the other hand, she also describes the preeminence that the relationship between Göpel and her husband took on. Beckmann felt that Göpel understood him, intellectually and artistically. Both Beckmanns esteemed Göpel's sense of culture and humanity, as Mathilde Q. Beckmann repeatedly writes in her diary. Cf. Bormann 2007, pp. 127–29.

period, alone, to Montagnola, so Purrmann could paint her portrait. The famous Swiss photographer and documentary filmmaker Kurt Blum recorded the encounter in impressive photographs. The intensive days Barbara spent with Purrmann were a great experience for her, especially observing the artist at work and engaging in extensive conversations with him. In 1961 the Göpels published their first joint book, on Hans Purrmann, prompting the poet and friend Günther Eich to telegraph his congratulations: “Truly great job!”³⁶

Barbara was now becoming increasingly self-confident and revived her dream of becoming a writer. While her husband was still alive, she used her maiden name when publishing her highly expert exhibition reviews and auction reports in the *SÜDDEUTSCHEN ZEITUNG* and the *FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINEN ZEITUNG*. In the now long-forgotten fashionable magazine *GESELLSCHAFT* (Society), later renamed *GESELLSCHAFT UND PARTY* (Society and party), she edited extensive texts on such diverse subjects as religious icons, Jugendstil, Rococo commodes, or the attractions of Venice as well as a longer account of Purrmann’s work on her portrait. For the French periodical *LA REVUE DES VOYAGES*, she published several enchanting travel reports under the heading “Kunstliebhaber auf Reisen” (Art lovers on the road).³⁷ At that time she also became friends with Ursula von Kardorff, who wrote for the *SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG* and had close ties to the German resistance during World War II.³⁸ Barbara’s promising start in fine arts journalism came to an end, though, when she decided to continue work on the catalogue raisonné of Beckmann’s paintings started by her husband, who passed away in 1966. That same year, the Max Beckmann Gesellschaft officially commissioned Barbara to complete the project. It was a huge undertaking, which Erhard Göpel had at most briefly outlined during his lifetime, and would demand all her strength before being ready for publication.³⁹ Barbara devoted the next ten years,

during which she became a chain smoker, exclusively to this major project, assisted by her reliable employee Elisabeth (“Beth”) von Ow. She visited all the collectors and museums that owned works by Beckmann and was in constant contact with Mathilde Q. Beckmann, whom she visited several times in New York, as well as with Beckmann’s son, Peter, who was head physician at a clinic in Murnau. In 1976 the two volumes finally went to press (figs. 4–5)—to a great extent indebted to the involvement of the art historian and art dealer Eberhard W. Kornfeld in Bern, with whom the Göpels had been on friendly terms throughout their lives. Barbara had asked another friend of the couple’s, the typographer and book designer Herbert Post, to design the cover. He had previously designed the cover of the joint volume on Purrmann.

The catalogue raisonné was not only a great success among Beckmann scholars; it was in every respect exemplary and one of the best oeuvre catalogues in the area of classical modernism. One glance inside the volumes is sufficient to get a sense of the immense workmanship that the catalogue demanded. Barbara spent most of her adult life conducting research, beyond the range of the catalogue, into the life and work of Beckmann, who never ceased to fascinate her. She wasn’t one to pen texts open to multiple interpretations, however, instead preferring unambiguous facts, the true foundations of art history. Barbara had too much respect for writings with philosophical content to attempt such writing herself, although her early art-historical texts, annotations in the catalogue raisonné, and extensive correspondence demonstrate her literary talent. Conspicuous are her close friendships with women authors who in a subtle manner vicariously fulfilled her lifelong desire to write.

Barbara’s inexhaustible humor—which she at times also directed at herself when she felt she didn’t live up to her demanding standards—always provided a wonderful enhancement to any conversation. She had no tolerance for weakness, not even her own. Sentimentality was utterly foreign to her, and, in that sense, she was thoroughly bound to the virtues of the old school, which for her had their origin in Berlin. It is therefore hardly surprising that she bequeathed so much of her estate to the City of Berlin. This included the portrait of her husband as well as the self-portrait of her great, lifelong hero painted during the same period in Amsterdam, which set the benchmark for each visitor to her apartment who felt moved by it.⁴⁰ Everyone who visited Barbara will recall the courtyard of the Kaulbachstrasse in Munich and the tall windows of the former artist’s studio, built in the nineteenth

century as a garden house, which lent her apartment a charm all its own. The attentive visitor standing before the door would notice two unusual objects: a navigation lamp, like those used on ships, mounted on the corner of the house, and a mirror by the kitchen window. The ship’s lamp didn’t just provide light, it also referred to one of Barbara’s great passions—the sea and the “mariners,” as she liked to call seamen. The window by the kitchen was a purely practical item. Barbara never wanted to greet a guest unprepared. Shortly after ringing the bell, one would hear her quick steps, even at an advanced age, as she descended the steep staircase, before appearing at the door a second later, welcoming her visitor with a friendly smile (fig. 6).

Late one evening, a few days before her death, we spoke about Beckmann’s self-portrait again. It was one of her “ready for press” lectures, which she had a knack for nonchalantly weaving into a normal conversation. She spoke about the form of the picture, in particular about the hands, which she found dubious, and about the haunting, even slightly fearful expression with which Beckmann had gazed at her for so many years. It was a way of bidding farewell.

36 Cf. ERHARD GÖPEL and BARBARA GÖPEL, *Leben und Meinungen des Malers Hans Purrmann* (Wiesbaden, 1961). Telegram from Günther Eich, August 22, 1961, Erhard Göpel Papers, Department of Manuscripts, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

37 Cf. inter alia, BARBARA GÖPEL, “Venedig für Fortgeschrittene,” *Gesellschaft* 4 (1961), p. 12; “Kunstliebhaber auf Reisen,” *La Revue des Voyages: Die internationale Gesellschafts- und Reisezeitschrift* (Fall 1961), p. 20.

38 Cf. URSULA VON KARDORFF, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen 1942–1945* (Munich, 1992). Published in English as *Diary of a Nightmare: Berlin, 1942–1945*, trans. Ewan Butler (New York, 1965).

39 Cf. ERHARD GÖPEL and BARBARA GÖPEL, *Max Beckmann: Katalog der Gemälde*, 2 vols. (Bern, 1976).

40 Cf. *Max Beckmann: Das Vermächtnis Barbara Göpel*, ed. Andreas Schalhorn and Petra Winter, exh. cat. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Berlin, 2018).

Image Captions

Fig. 1: Erhard Göpel reflected in a display window, Munich, 1954. Photo: Peter Keetmann

Fig. 2: Max Beckmann, *Portrait of Erhard Göpel*, 1944, Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Bequest Barbara Göpel

Fig. 3: *Portrait of Erhard Göpel* in his library, n.d. Photo: Barbara Göpel

Fig. 4: Barbara Göpel with her catalogue raisonné of Max Beckmann’s paintings. Photographer unknown

Fig. 5: Barbara Göpel and Erhard Göpel, *Max Beckmann: Katalog der Gemälde*, cover of vol. 1, Bern, 1976

Fig. 6: Barbara Göpel at home, before the painting *Self-Portrait in the Bar* (1942), 2011. Photo: Scarlet Berner