



Otherness on Display in Max Beckmann's *Annual Fair*

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In 1921, the German artist Max Beckmann (1884–1950) began work on a print portfolio entitled *Annual Fair* (Jahrmarkt). He had found success early in his career, gaining a reputation as one of Germany's most important young painters, working in a manner heavily influenced by the Impressionists. In 1914, at the onset of World War I, Beckmann volunteered for the German medical corps and was discharged for health reasons the following year. His wartime experiences were traumatic, precipitating a dramatic shift in style in which he began to reject traditional depictions of space and proportion, creating crowded, vertiginous pictorial spaces. The theater, carnival, and circus became increasingly important settings for his imagery, functioning as a metaphor for the folly and chaos of life.

FIG. 1

Max Beckmann
 German, 1884–1950
Negro Dance (detail)
 From the portfolio *Annual Fair* (Jahrmarkt), 1922
 Etching and drypoint on paper
 Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)
 Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.9
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Many scholars view the *Annual Fair* portfolio as highly autobiographical by the identification of the artist's first wife, Minna Beckmann-Tube, whose signature topknot hairstyle places her in the role of the tightrope walker, the shooting-gallery proprietress, a rider on the carousel, and one of the performers resting backstage in *Behind the Scenes*. Beckmann himself has referred to the hooded figure on the tightrope with his wife as a self-portrait, which adds further support for this interpretation of the series.¹ However, most scholars who examine *Jahrmarkt* overlook *Negro Dance* and *The Negro*, the two works that most heavily complicate such readings.²

The term *jahrmarkt* refers to a carnival or fair, often held in an outdoor public space during Carnival, the period before Lent. Many of these fairs featured jugglers, acrobats, and street performers like those depicted in the ten prints in the portfolio. A frequent visitor to Zirkus Busch in Berlin and Cirque Medrano in Paris,³ Beckmann clearly found appeal in the circus.⁴ The artist's representations of circus and carnival attractions were not limited to the *Annual Fair* portfolio; his first foray into such imagery was as early as 1912, with a lithograph entitled *Carnival Stall* (*Jahrmarktstube*) which shows a clown and a horn player from behind, similar to the point of view Beckmann would later employ in *The Tall Man*, a print from *Annual Fair*. The completion of the large-scale canvas *Carnival* (*Fastnacht*) in 1920 marked the beginning of a series of circus-themed works that reached its zenith between 1920 and 1925 but continued well into the 1940s.

Annual Fair begins with a self-portrait: Beckmann sits before a sign that reads Circus Beckm[ann], casting himself in the role of circus proprietor [Fig. 2]. As he rings a bell with one hand, he gestures to his left, beckoning the viewer to enter. The following two prints give the viewer a glimpse backstage; in *Dressing Room* (*Garderobe*), two performers in a cramped dressing area apply makeup, while in *Behind the Curtains* (*Hinter den Kulissen*), costumed performers sit and

FIG. 2

Max Beckmann
German, 1884–1950
The Barker
From the portfolio *Annual Fair* (*Jahrmarkt*), 1922
Etching and drypoint on paper
Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)
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chat while several others play instruments. The remainder of the prints features sights typically found at a fair or carnival: a young woman with a rifle stands inside a shooting gallery, inviting the viewer to hit a bull's-eye; a sideshow act features a "tall" man being gawked at by a curious audience; a carousel is filled with whirling carousel animals and riders; a pair of tightrope walkers balances precariously above a net; and a serpent coils around the neck of a female snake charmer. Two images, however, are sights that are likely unfamiliar to contemporary audiences: both *The Negro* (Der Neger) and *Negro Dance* (Niggertanz) depict people of African origin on display, a common attraction at fairs and circuses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In *The Negro* [Fig. 3], two Africans stand in front of a circus tent, flanked by a horn-toting clown. The clown rests his elbow along a railing and thrusts his hand in front of the African man facing the viewer, creating a physical barrier between the performers and the viewer. Ethnographic exhibitions were often situated in fenced-in areas to create a clear division between the viewers and those on display. In an attempt to establish a level of authenticity, performers were frequently placed in an environment that contained architectural forms that mimicked those found in their homeland. The boundary between performers and spectators was assiduously maintained, creating a clear line between the "civilized" visitors and the "primitive" natives, a division between "us" and "them."⁵ The clown, perhaps, reinforces this barrier between the performer and the viewer. His pointed finger, which mirrors Beckmann's gesture in the first print, encourages the viewer to continue through the circus, as well as the portfolio.

The practice of the display of foreign peoples can be traced as far back as ancient Egypt, when human conquests were paraded through the streets as a form of reinforcing the Egyptians' dominance over their enemies.⁶ The rise of the ethnographic exhibition in the nineteenth century coincided with the colonization of areas of Africa and Asia, and functioned as a method of consolidating national identity. In addition to their presence at carnivals and circuses, ethnographic exhibitions were a common feature at world's fairs, where they served to imply the superiority of the white race. These exhibits often included examples of architecture, weapons, tools, handicrafts, and clothing, all of which would be considered "primitive," especially in comparison to the rapidly industrializing European and American cities to which these exhibitions

FIG. 3

Max Beckmann

German, 1884–1950

The Negro

From the portfolio *Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper

Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)

Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.6

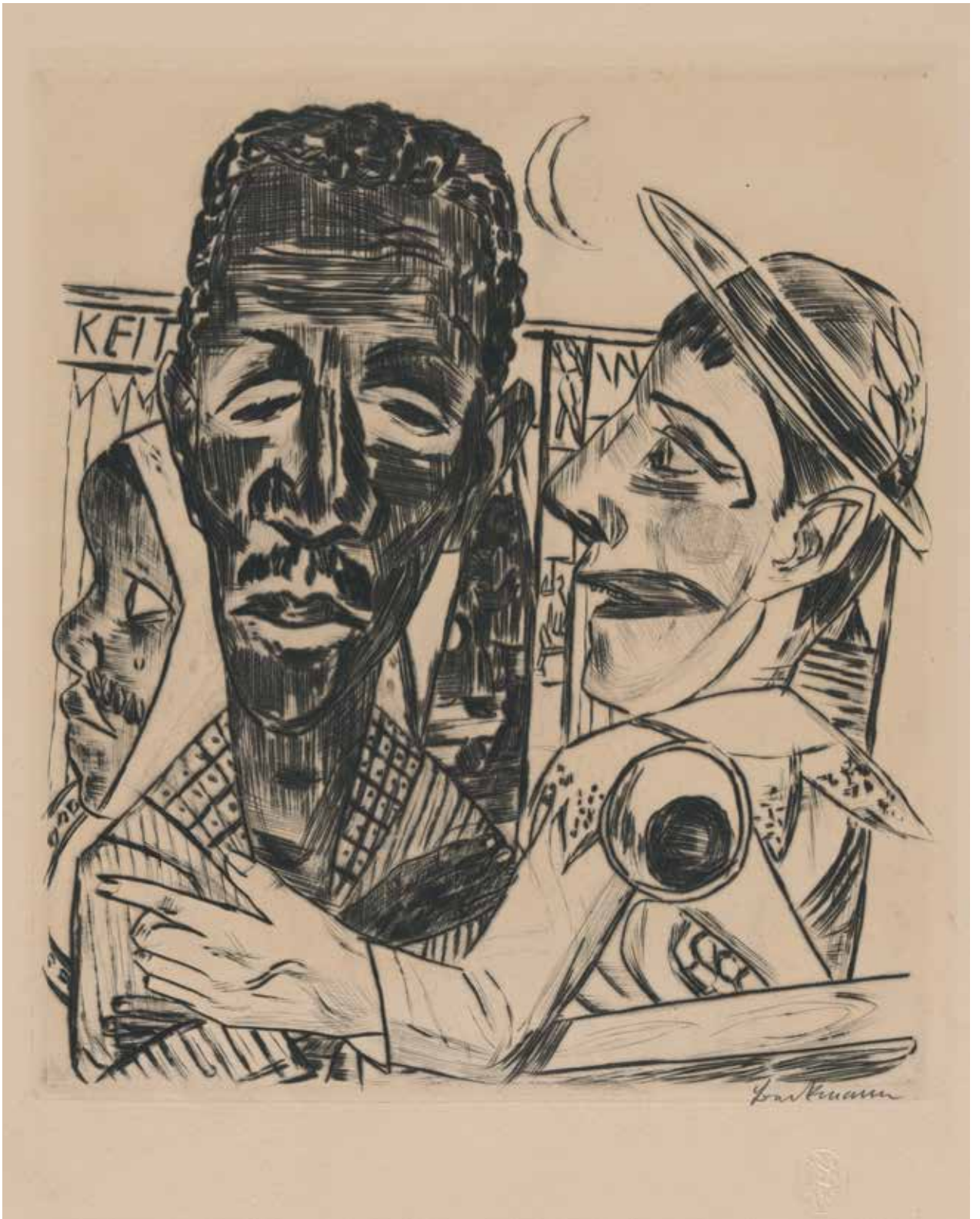
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traveled. Exhibiting Africans in huts and displaying their lifestyles at an event that celebrated the newest innovations and achievements in science, culture, and technology made the contrast even greater. The physiognomic variances between the Africans on display and the European viewing public were emphasized, as well as the perceived inferiority of African culture.

Businessmen such as Carl Hagenbeck capitalized upon the demand for what the Germans called *Völkerschauen* (people shows). Originally an animal trader, Hagenbeck established a thriving business in Hamburg in the 1860s, providing wild animals for zoos, circuses, and private collections throughout Europe. In 1874, at a time when ethnographic displays of people from far-flung locales were gaining popularity, Hagenbeck expanded his business to include the procurement of individuals from countries and regions including Egypt, Somalia, Sri Lanka, India, Siberia, Mongolia, North America, Chile, Cameroon, and Australia for inclusion in exhibitions presented at carnivals, world's fairs, zoos, and circuses.

Hagenbeck not only secured animals and human performers for other organizations, but he formed his own traveling circus, which grew out of his experiences in importing foreigners for ethnographic exhibitions. Hilke Thode-Arora observes that the circus impresario had several criteria when selecting an ethnic group for a show: “the group must be strange in some way; it must have particular physical characteristics; and it must have picturesque customs.”⁷ In essence, the more “exotic” a particular culture was to European eyes, the greater appeal it held. As the renown of these shows grew, Hagenbeck took them on tour, beginning in Germany and expanding to other countries within Europe. By the mid-1880s, Hagenbeck’s *Völkerschau* had grown from a small single show in his backyard in Hamburg to multiple large-scale productions that toured the major European capitals and drew hundreds of thousands of visitors. This increase in demand and audience size was not unique. What began as piecemeal displays at the beginning of the nineteenth century were widespread by 1921, when Beckmann began making prints for the *Jahrmarkt* portfolio. Ethnographic exhibitions were being produced throughout Europe and North America, appearing in circuses, carnivals, world's fairs, and zoological gardens.⁸



Beckmann executed two states of several prints in the portfolio, meaning that he printed a certain number of impressions and then returned to the matrix—in this instance, a copper plate—and made alterations to the composition. The RISD Museum owns the second state of the portfolio, and Beckmann made significant alterations to the composition of *The Negro* between the first and second state. He further accentuated the circles of makeup on the clown's cheeks and embellished both the clothing of the clown and of the African figure facing the picture plane. The most dramatic changes made to the print, however, are the enhancements that add context to the figures' surroundings.

The additions Beckmann made to the adjoining attraction's tent clarify and enhance the environment and the atmosphere that surrounds the African figures and the clown. Behind the clown's nose, a vertical strip with a few images runs along the length of the tent's opening, ostensibly advertising the attraction inside. Although the images are difficult to make out, they appear figural, perhaps alluding to a sideshow act featuring contortionism, or sword-swallowing, or an individual with a genetic anomaly, such as dwarfism. These images, although ambiguous, may provide clues as to the other addition to the tent. Visible in the upper left portion of the composition, part of the sign advertising the attraction inside reads -KEIT, the German suffix meaning “-ness,” which is added to adjectives and participles to form abstract nouns. Although an infinite number of possibilities exist for the word on the side of the tent, *abartigkeit* (abnormality), *abscheulichkeit* (hideousness), or *merkwürdigkeit* (strangeness) are all plausible solutions. Regardless of which word is on the side of the tent, its addition to the print enhances the spectacular nature of the scene—nestled between a horn-toting clown and a tent with a large sign boldly advertising the wonders inside, the two African figures stand in an enclosure, one attraction within the crowded, chaotic fray of the circus.

The ethnographic exhibition and the circus sideshow, both of which placed human “curiosities” on display, were frequently presented together in a juxtaposition that can be traced back to the annual fair. Many scientists believed race and anatomical deformity were connected, thus the placement of different racial types adjacent to medical anomalies seemed logical.⁹ John Phillip Short observes that “[p]opular ‘anthropological’ works, usually in the form of travelogues, often presented primitive Africans in popular-Darwinist terms as the ‘missing link’—as examples of evolutionary atavism—reproducing a theme common to the freak show.”¹⁰ Certainly for the ordinary spectator, the combination of genetic abnormalities, self-made human oddities

(the tattooed human, the snake charmer, the sword swallower), and “exotic” foreigners held a sort of appeal for their strangeness and “otherness.” The presentation of the ethnographic exhibition within the sideshow had enormous popular and thus commercial appeal, and this practice continued well into the twentieth century.

While *The Negro* makes reference to the practice of displaying foreigners in ethnographic exhibitions, it also bears a number of compositional similarities to a lithograph that Beckmann printed a few years earlier, entitled *The Way Home* (Der Nachhauseweg), the first print in the *Hell* portfolio, published in 1919. *The Way Home* [Fig. 4] shows Beckmann and a disfigured military veteran in the foreground. Like the clown in *The Negro*, Beckmann stands to the right, his arm thrust forward in a similar gesture, but in this instance, he clutches the stump of a veteran’s amputated arm. In both instances, the clown’s and Beckmann’s outstretched arms block the viewer’s access but also function as a framing device, calling attention to the figure, essentially presenting the disabled veteran and the African performer. Beckmann, as well as other artists in Germany after World War I, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, depicted wounded soldiers as figures outside of the norm, with disfigured faces and missing limbs. Presented as impoverished, pitiful figures, their altered bodies made them the subject of morbid fascination, visual reminders of the horrors of the war and the subsequent political conflict and economic chaos of the Weimar Republic.¹¹ The similarities between the

two groups—disabled veterans and ethnographic performers—and the ways in which Beckmann portrays them, render them a similar type of “other”: a figure to gawk at who also elicits feelings of curiosity, pity, and in some instances, patriotism.



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FIG. 4

Beckmann, Max
German, 1884–1950
The Way Home
Plate 2 from the portfolio *Hell*
(Die Hölle), 1919
Lithograph

Sheet: 87 × 61 cm. (34 ¼ × 24 in.)

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The second print in *Jahrmarkt* to feature African performers is *Negro Dance* [Fig. 5], which shows a group of African dancers and musicians on a stage with spectators at their feet. Three performers play rudimentary musical instruments: on the right is a seated figure with a stringed instrument, a figure in the center holds two cylindrical objects aloft, and a figure to the left grasps the handles of two cymbal-like instruments. A fourth figure stands on stage on the far left, his mouth open as though singing as he holds a spear and shield. A dancer stands out from the group: dressed in a close-fitting shirt and pants that accentuate her hourglass figure, veiled in gauzy, polka-dotted fabric, she simultaneously suggests modesty, mystery, and exoticism.

Although the creators of ethnographic exhibitions asserted that they made visitors privy to the everyday activities of the exhibition participants, these shows were highly staged, often in the form of a narrative with an opening scene, followed by an act of conflict, such as an abduction or an attack on the village. Such events usually precipitated a battle, with a joyful coda—a peace treaty or a marriage—providing an occasion for singing and dancing.¹² Undoubtedly, these were scripted spectacles, despite their appearance of genuineness.¹³ Although some individuals were recruited as novices, others had worked on shows over a long period of time. Eric Ames notes that in Hagenbeck’s case, “[t]rained performers such as acrobats, snake charmers, and elephant drivers had often been recruited for [his] troupes,” thus populating some of his shows with seasoned performers.¹⁴ Additionally, it was common for the groups to sign contracts with their employers, including stipulations as to how often and under what conditions they were to perform, their salaries, the types of props they were to wear and carry, and their medical coverage.¹⁵ “By the early 1910s,” observes Ames, “the process of collecting foreign peoples had indeed become a form of casting, with recruiters looking not for ‘anthropological types,’ but for actors to fill scripted roles that would literally be assigned to them.”¹⁶ As troupes moved from city to city, they were sometimes asked to “perform” as another culture in a different venue, so that the same group of individuals could be billed, for example, as from Dahomey during a performance in Berlin and from Somalia at a show in Paris.¹⁷

FIG. 5

Max Beckmann

German, 1884–1950

*Negro Dance*From the portfolio *Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper

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Despite the clearly orchestrated performance that masqueraded as the inhabitants' "everyday life," most viewers were sufficiently persuaded by the authenticity of the shows, and that of its participants, architecture, costumes, and ethnographic objects.

The dance being performed in Beckmann's image was most likely part of the ethnographic exhibition. The stage upon which the performers stand is certainly indicative of this, and the incongruousness of the dancer with her fellow performers is a clear sign of the artificiality of the scene. The dancer wears a sheer veil over a form-fitting ensemble and her skin is lighter than that of the other performers, suggesting that she is perhaps of Middle Eastern or North African descent, performing the type of veiled "harem dance" frequently depicted in French Orientalist

FIG. 6

Max Beckmann
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Negro Dance (detail)
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paintings of the nineteenth century, while the other figures appear to be generalized representations of sub-Saharan Africans. This sort of cultural “bricolage,” in which a variety of exoticized cultural material is brought together with no regard for the differences within it, emphasizes the extent to which many of these exhibitions were inauthentic.¹⁸ The mere suggestion of “otherness” was sufficiently accurate to entertain audiences with little knowledge of cultures outside of their own, and who had no way of knowing they were being fooled.

In his depiction of the circus, Beckmann does not render any of the acts traditionally associated with its glamorous side, such as trick riding or trapeze stunts. Instead, among the six images that depict real acts, four of them belong to the sideshow, implying perhaps that the artist found greater interest in those who existed on the fringes of society. Although the viewer is given a view behind the scenes—Beckmann peels back the metaphorical curtain and allows the audience to see the artificiality at work—it is always at a safe distance. The barker, the shooting-gallery proprietress, the African performer, and the snake charmer all confront the viewer right up at the picture plane, although in each instance a barrier impedes any interaction, creating a clear separation between spectacle and spectator. In other instances, Beckmann depicts the other activities of the circus—the backstage area, the carousel, the tall man, and the African dance—as physically distant from the viewer.

The circus is a space of memory and nostalgia, an escape from the everyday world, yet Beckmann presents it as a place of chaos, duplicity, stoic confrontation, and impenetrability, perhaps mirroring the chaos of the Weimar Republic. *The Negro* and *Negro Dance* may be reminders of the legacy of German imperial rule while also hinting at the displays of “otherness” disabled war veterans were subjected to in contemporary German society. Rather than *Jahrmarkt* functioning solely as a portfolio that chronicles the ups and downs of Beckmann’s marriage and the intricacies of his relationship with his wife, the portfolio is both deeply personal and a broader examination of role-playing, artificiality, and the performance of identity in postwar Germany.

Many thanks to Jan Howard, Emily Peters, and Amy Pickworth for their insightful comments on this essay.

1 Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Ambivalence: Personal and Political," in *Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words: Max Beckmann Contextualized*, edited by Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Makela (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008), 117. Washton Long also identifies Beckmann in the audience of *The Tall Man* and riding the boat in *Merry-Go-Round*. Other scholars view the portfolio as a part of Beckmann's long-term investigation into the theater, fair, and circus as a metaphor for life in postwar Germany. These readings of *Jahrmarkt* are not incorrect, but they overlook the nuances of the various images in the portfolio. See Hans Belting, *Max Beckmann: Tradition as Problem in Modern Art* (New York: Timken Publishers, Inc., 1989). Jo-Anne Bernie Danzker and Amélie Ziersch, eds. *Max Beckmann, Welt-Theater: Das graphische Werk 1901–1946* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1993), and Cornelia Homburg, "Circus Beckmann," in *Max Beckmann—A Dream of Life*, edited by Tilman Osterwold (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006).

2 Washton Long, 121. The other two prints in the portfolio that do not depict Beckmann or his wife are *Dressing Room* and *Snake Lady*, although Washton Long contends that the figure leaving the tent in *Snake Lady* resembles Beckmann's body type.

3 Formerly known as Cirque Fernando, which both Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec depicted in circus-related canvases painted in the 1870s and 1880s.

4 Cornelia Homburg, "Circus Beckmann," in *Max Beckmann—A Dream of Life*, edited by Tilman Osterwold (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 35.

5 Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Aug. 1993): 344.

6 Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, "Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 4. The ethnographic exhibition, which reached the height of its popularity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has origins in both ancient Egypt and in the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities, or *Wunderkammer*. Cabinets of curiosities arose in mid-sixteenth-century Europe as repositories for all manner of wondrous and exotic objects. These collections assembled a wide array of specimens collected from all over the world, ranging from paintings and sculptures to the decorative arts, including clocks, globes, and music boxes, to naturalia, such as coral, seashells, plants, taxidermy, and skeletons. Marking the intersection of science and superstition, the cabinet of curiosities functioned as a space in which scholars and scientists could conduct empirical study as a way to further understand the world in which we live. As scientists and scholars moved beyond flora and fauna to document, categorize, and classify the various races and ethnicities of humankind, the demand for displays of foreign individuals increased.

7 Hilke Thode-Arora, "Hagenbeck's European Tours," in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 167. Eric Ames believes that these guidelines were never explicitly stated, but implied in Hagenbeck's correspondence with his agents. See Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 41–42.

8 Pascal Blanchard, et al., indicate that the only way to chart the growth of the ethnographic exhibition is through the profits that people made: "Such quantifiable information underlines the popularity of these shows, including those in small towns, and the financial benefits they brought to their promoters are obvious. It tells us that profits rose steadily until the beginning of the First World War, and that the growing number of troupes and universal or international exhibitions from the 1880s generated a tenfold increase in the opportunities for the public to see the 'exotics,'" in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 12.

9 John Phillip Short, "Carnival Knowledge: Enlightenment and Distraction in the Cultural Field," in *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 90–95.

10 *Ibid.*, 95.

11 For more on this topic, see Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), especially chapter 1.

12 Hilke Thode-Arora, "Hagenbeck's European Tours," in *Human Zoos*, 170.

13 Blanchard, et al., "The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," in *Human Zoos*, 20.

14 Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*, 47.

15 *Ibid.*, 50.

16 *Ibid.*, 51. Some of the individuals who were recruited for these shows were domestic workers who were already living in Europe, and one group arrived in Hamburg wearing European clothing, much to Hagenbeck's dismay. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

17 Blanchard, et al., "The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," 33.

18 Abigail Solomon-Godeau labels Gauguin's borrowing of motifs from various cultures "bricolage," describing the artist's primitivism as an invention culled together from an array of sources. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Books, 1992), 328.

Portfolio

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objects are identified on page 60