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Marcus Behmer

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Galerie Buchholz New York is delighted to present the first monographic exhibition devoted to the German artist Marcus Behmer in the United States since 1912. Born in 1879 in Weimar, Marcus Behmer began his artistic practice in 1900 working in the field of book illustration and graphic design. Imaginative, emotional, funny, and courageous, he developed a style of drawing and engraving that was celebrated in the German modernist bibliophile communities of the early 20th century, working extensively for the publisher *Insel Verlag* and producing illustrations for editions of books by Balzac, Voltaire, Goethe, Philipp Otto Runge, and Oscar Wilde, among others, and contributing drawings and illustrations to *Simplicissimus*, the satirical, progressive German magazine.

Marcus Behmer moved between Weimar, Munich, Paris, and Florence as an early adult before settling in Berlin. He sought out a wide range of artistic influences including Japanese woodcuts, Italian renaissance drawing, Persian design, Arabic literature, Greek and Latin texts, Buddhist and Old Testament stories, as well as literature and art by his contemporaries, with a notable love for the English illustrator and author Aubrey Beardsley. By 1903, he was a member of the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee* (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), the first organized movement to campaign for overt social recognition of homosexuality. He was conscripted into the German army and served in World War I where he spent much of his active duty making portraits of wounded soldiers to send to their families. Back in Berlin in the 1920s, his drawings, etchings, New Years greeting cards, paper cut-outs, and erotic works developed in a free and highly personal style. In 1927 he designed and cast a modern Hebrew font which was used by the Berlin *Soncino Gesellschaft* to print fine Hebrew books as well as an edition of the Torah. His work with Jewish publishers together with his open homosexuality ultimately led to his arrest by the Nazis in 1936. He was incarcerated for 19 months for “decadent or anti-social tastes and ideas”.

In a 1957 issue of the periodical “The Studio”, poet and critic Edoard Roditi wrote “During the years of his martyrdom, Behmer drew a series of allegories that [...] record the persecuted artist’s hopes and fears, his satirical observations and his terrifying hallucinations. On the bitter chalice from which he too must drink a foul beverage brewed by his tormentors, one can read the names of other thinkers and artists who have similarly been persecuted for their beliefs or tastes. Socrates, Cellini, Verlaine, Wilde... Elsewhere, the dolphin that once saved the life of the poet Arion is either coming to Behmer’s rescue or perhaps represents Behmer himself. It is as a fantastic visionary, a recorder of visions and apocalyptic allegories, that Behmer has perhaps expressed most faithfully his complex personality, both morbid and childlike, both learned and playful.”

The exhibition at Galerie Buchholz New York draws from the artist’s entire oeuvre with over 200 drawings, illustrations, etchings, books, ex-libri, paper cut-outs, New Years cards, manuscripts, letters and photographs, including drawings made in prison. Works by Marcus Behmer are held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (many gifted by J.B. Neumann); the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the RISD Museum, Providence; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. In England, his works belong to the British Museum as well as the Victoria & Albert Museum. In Germany, his works are held in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, the Kunsthalle Mannheim, the Berlinische Galerie, the Classik Stiftung Weimar, as well as the Klingspor Museum in Offenbach. In Japan, his work belongs to the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Nagoya.

It is difficult to know where to begin in commenting upon the bulk of Behmer's many achievements. Initials, tailpieces, arabesques, illustrations, book-plates, grotesque facetious etched plates, satirical caricatures, New-Year cards, book covers, broadsides of old-fashioned wood-cuts, decorative borders for his own literary fragments of no mean order of merit, graceful fans and anniversary announcements – these are some of the things to which he has given his attention. No matter how slight the work may be, his harmonious treatment of surfaces and the rhythmical division of blacks and whites, are marked by notable taste. The print departments of the museums at Hamburg, Frankfort, and Weimar possess the best collections of his work, and the visitor is impressed by his interest in reproductive methods and by a fastidiousness and preciousness which bring joy to the heart of the modern connoisseur. If it were not also characterized by a rare degree of mastery, we should say it is the work of a brilliant amateur, an "autodidact" whose most serious and agreeable pastimes are the byways of art. He will never tire of work because he plays at it like a dilettant, or rather like a patient fifteenth-century scribe.

Much of Behmer's work is done on a minute scale with the most painstaking care, and among the best of these miniatures are the circular soft-ground etchings, reminding us of Greek cameos and coins. We know of no graphic work to which his little "Saint George," or the "Saint Anthony of Padua attracting Fish with his Eloquence," can be compared. They are printed, as are his other works, on rare old paper which he is continually in search of, like Ernest Haskell, whose aesthetic technique resembles Behmer's in its uncompromising detail. His portraits, too, strike a peculiar note. Some are in the early Florentine style, and will appeal to those of our own day on whom primitive art seems to exert such a strong fascination. You need never to have seen his young Latin loafers to divine their ardent Southern passions. Akin to these is the remarkable portrait of Alexander Olbricht, another talented etcher of Weimar, whose profile, with its fine deep-set eyes, suggesting a stormy, energetic nature, was etched with caressing, affectionate art. Although there are flat surfaces like those employed by Vallotton, there are no dead spaces. His precision, aristocratic reserve, and a certain hardness, are far cries from the freedom of many of his contemporaries, but his painstaking method does not look labored. He is devoted to book decoration, and has ornamented many of the finest products of the famous Insel Verlag. The initials in these books display an Oriental intricacy and cunning, and the best illustrations, successfully and harmoniously combine what Walter Crane, in his admirable work on Decorative Illustration, has termed the pictorial statement and the decorative statement.

Many noted Continental critics have paid tributes to his art, but the time for a final estimate is not yet ripe, although no account of contemporary German graphic art is complete without some notice of him. He is only thirty-three years old, and is still in a period of ferment and manifold activities. Some of his utterances have a morbidity typical of our generation, which could at any moment become a destructive force, were it not tempered by a quaint, ever-present humor. His aesthetic sense, too, is becoming so sharp and his artist judgment – inherited from his father, a conservative professor of art at Weimar – seems so well balanced, than an admirer, watching him round out his fame, is tempted to prophesy only the best things.

Martin Birnbaum, "Marcus Behmer", New York Berlin Photographic Company, 1912