

Soldiers Describe Combat IV: Max Beckmann (1915)

Abstract

As a soldier, the artist Max Beckmann (1884–1950) experienced the First World War near the front as a hospital worker. Beckmann's wartime service led to a series of frescoes illustrating the brutality and cruelty of war. In the passages below, the reader can glimpse the horrors and surreal sights and sounds of industrial warfare.

Source

April 20, 1915

How happy I am that Peter is doing better.

I am working intensely on my fresco. At the moment I am somewhat nervous, so I feel myself surrounded by enemies all the time, which is very unpleasant. There is probably no reason for this.

Here things are very dramatic again. The English are intent on breaking through exactly where we are. Today everyone was on alert. In the evening there was an insane thundering of cannons. Now it is quieter – but that is the worst, for now they are attacking.

Earlier I walked up the hill once again. At the top sits a white villa, which has been turned into a military hospital. I climbed up onto the roof, and from there I had a perfect view of the whole immense front. Cold, narrow, dark, gray clouds against the setting sun. In the distance the mountain range at Ypres and along the whole horizon the horrible explosions of grenades and shrapnel.

Below in the military hospital lay many wounded from the last few days. One had just been brought in and lay there dying. He had a huge bandage around his head, which was dark with blood although it had been changed just half an hour earlier. Such a young face with such fine features. It was terrible how the face suddenly became transparent near the left eye, just like a broken china pot. He groaned heavily in his unconsciousness and moved his hands back and forth restlessly. He is lying in the sort of wooden box used for typhus patients.

At the open window, the less seriously wounded sat and watched the battle. Their eyes wandered restlessly over the enormous expanse.

Then I went slowly across the green fields back home. I went by an old farmhouse with a small pond in which willows were reflected. Heavy, black, cold silhouettes.

Down below near my villa the Bavarians were marching in position, accompanied by music. They had been alerted a couple of hours earlier, and as I had done so many times before, I watched these closed, dark ranks of human beings, who had gathered together under the thunder of their fate. Now they were off. And the howling of the guns mixed with the sound of their instruments to make wild, frenzied music.

I wandered about for a long time. I had the feverish desire simply to run after them. This fire-spewing line on the horizon has a terrible attraction for me.

Reasonably, I was not officially allowed to do this, however, and thus today ended like so many others with letter writing.

Whew! There was just a shot that shook not only the windows but also the walls and doors.

My hairdresser friend is both the bath attendant and the hairdresser. He watches over our villa sort of like a guard dog – for he sleeps here and is supposed to be here from 7 a.m. on. He does this, however, only for a couple days after his weekly dressing-down. Otherwise, in accordance with a habit that is too pleasant to give up, he comes at 9:30 a.m. A real nice fellow, who just talks a bit too much. But truly genuine and – despite having the mannerisms of a hairdresser – quite the man.

Source: Max Beckmann, *Briefe im Kriege* (1914/1915). Munich, 1993, pp. 43–45.

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