

Extract from Allen Fisher – online *Art History (Modernist)*  
**Extrinsic and intrinsic content**



**Max Beckmann, *Carnival*, 1920, oil on canvas, 187 x 92 cm (74 x 36"), Tate collection, London.**

There are at least two ways of comprehending what is going on in this work.

The first, the intrinsic view, is to simply look at it without any knowledge of who the figures represent. The second is to look at the work after you have learnt who the figures represent.

**INTRINSIC view**

Max Beckmann's *Carnival*, 1920, distorts the framings to encourage a world of claustrophobia and restraint. The slope of the picture rail, the juxtaposed small shelf with a music horn and a bell and a rainbow of circles (some propose that this represents a gnostic cosmos) and a concealed mirror behind this. The bugle held by the feet of the man on the floor, parallel to the shelf. All in contrast to the window and window ledge, the vertical and horizontal candles (and cat). The diagonal indications from the the closed fan held by the man on the floor, the woman's closed fan and the man's pointing finger of his lefthand at a right angle to the carnival clapper or broken, mock sword in his left hand.

In this first viewing, the intrinsic viewing, the claustrophobic design of this work almost defines the psychological conditions involved. The male figure dressed in a

costume of a Commedia dell'Arte harlequin, has a melancholic expression. He holds a carnival clapper or is it a broken, mock sword in his right hand. His left hand points to somewhere above and behind him. Perhaps he points to a tilted shelf on the wall on which appear to be a horn, a small bell and a picture of the cosmos. The woman holds a fan in her right hand. She holds a violin in her left. Her costume also suggests carnival with its zigzag skirt fringe similar to a Commedia dell'Arte Columbine. She has a distant look that seems to signify worry. A figure lying on his back on the ground wears a carnival animal mask, holds a fan in his left hand. He balances a bugle or similar instrument with his feet. He is also in carnival or clown wear.

## **EXTRINSIC view**

In a second viewing, the extrinsic viewing, of Beckmann's *Carnival*, we can identify the man on his back as the artist Max Beckmann himself.

The male figure on the left derives from a drawing of Beckmann's art dealer I.B. Neumann. (There is a drypoint portrait of him in Frankfurt.)

The woman on the right is Fridel Battenburg, the wife of Ugi Battenberg the painter Beckmann studied with at Weimar.

Beckmann stayed with the Battenbergs after his traumatic wartime experience as a medical orderly in the First World War. He stayed with them for 4 years (1915-1919). Fridel was a musician and composer. She composed settings of poetry by Rilke and by Elizabeth Barratt-Browning. Beckmann made many drawings of her. The meaning we can accrue from this is not really about these personalities, but rather to inform us of Beckmann's considerable traumatic withdrawal from his medical service in the first year of the First World War and his very profound negative gnosticism, a philosophy he continued to engage with for the remainder of his life

An aspect of gnosticism in the picture is represented by the disc on the shelf at the top, in front of a mirror, with a bugle and a bell in front of it. It has rainbow circles representing the spheres of the cosmos.

Putting these different views together, perhaps this 'carnival' is a metaphor about the life of human beings in a disturbed world.