

ART HISTORY THESIS

EGON SCHIELE, MAX BECKMANN, AND FRANCESCO CLEMENTE:
SELF-PORTRAITS AND THE MALE IMAGE

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1991

M.F.A. CANDIDATES CLEARANCE FOR ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

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AR 592	Spring	1991
Course Number	Semester	Year

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The role of the self-portrait in art is overlooked as a significant element of social criticism. With feminism dominating contemporary social criticism, male self-reflection seems insignificant. Art criticizing male dominance and/or female oppression crosses the gender gap and becomes significant socially, but it rarely addresses male dominance from the correct perspective. Men are after all at the root of the problem, so we should look at art made by men about men for any truths that might help to ease social concerns. What follows is a discussion about male images done by male artists. We will look at three artists from three time periods who have looked at and used themselves as vehicles of both self and social reflection : Egon Schiele, 1890-1918, Max Beckmann, 1884-1950, and Francesco Clemente, 1952- . Each of these artists has spoken critically of what it is like to be human, yet each has maintained the essential identity of the male experience.

Schiele's and Beckmann's works represent two identities, the individual in self imposed isolation and the individual in a socially imposed isolation. Clemente's works represent the contemporary identity of man, whom in a socially critical era is expected to be sensitive to women's issues.

First there needs to be some definition of what is specifically male in both an historical and a contemporary sense. Ancient Greek culture gave us a purely narcissistic male. Portrayed as both god and man, he was the symbol of high civilization in which the beautiful was also the good. The whole of Greek culture suggested an intense concern with physical values and the embodied self. The body was the self, the essential being, and the soul was a mere shadow. The body was reality. " After death, men were mere phantoms,

squeaking shades pathetically concerned with the fate of their corpses and their memory on earth." ¹

Hercules remains as the epitome of muscular masculinity. A work such as Doryphoros, 450-440 B.C. (figure 1), by Polykleitos, typifies the Herculean archetype. The powerful body, strong shoulders, and thick muscular limbs embody the ideal physique. Hercules is the strongman whose "bodily exploits won him fame and the status of a god." ² This archetype became a formula for generations of Hellenistic and Roman rulers: a portrait head tacked on to the conventionally "divine" body. ³ The Renaissance employed Hercules as an all-purpose symbol of manhood and political power. The "formula" was used frequently by the aristocracy of Europe to tie itself to the Roman imperial lineage. What is important about these "bogus genealogies" is the use of the archetype. While the concentration of this practice was on the position and character of the portrayed individual, his likeness was secondary to stereotypes and idealization. ⁴ The supreme example of the use of this classical archetype in total disregard of reality and likeness is seen in Michelangelo's sculptures of Lorenzo and Giuliano de Medici, 1519-34 (figure 2). Michelangelo carved them as ancient Romans, "totally unrelated to anything known of their actual appearance." ⁵

¹ Margaret Walters, The Nude Male A New Perspective (London: Paddington Press LTD, 1978), p. 44.

² Walters, p. 9.

³ Walters, p. 50.

⁴ Pierce Rice, Man As Hero (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), p. 80.

⁵ Rice, p. 84.

In a debased form, Hercules lives on in the musclemen who dominate contemporary images of men. Recent pseudo-male images, such as the aggressively masculine heroes of war, the Wild West characters of John Wayne, or the excessive, caricatured masculinity of Sly Stallone's blue-collared macho men are all propagated by what Andrew Kimbrell calls the male mystique.⁶ In almost complete denial of the true self, modern man has become entranced by this "simulated masculinity" and lost a clear understanding of true masculinity. In this new image, man is autonomous, efficient, intensely self-interested and disconnected from community and earth.⁷ This false sense of identity lies at the root of the accusations of male insensitivity.

In her book, The Nude Male A New Perspective, Margaret Walters quotes a study by Philip Slater that suggests a possible early source of the male identity crisis. In discussing the women's view of a male dominated culture like the Greek's, Slater states that a women's view towards men is likely to be ambivalent,

... especially towards the one male she has some power over, her son. Alternately she accepts him as an idealized hero and rejects his masculine pretensions. Hence, the boy is likely to become preoccupied with proving his own masculinity and at the same time doubt it and need to assert his virility over and over in competition with other men. Since it is after all his physical maleness on which his mother's pride is focused and it is his childish pride that she is unable to tolerate, his physical maleness becomes of enormous importance to him. The male body dominates his

⁶ Andrew Kimbrell, "A Time for Men to Pull Together," Utne Reader, 49 (1991), p. 70.

⁷ Kimbrell, p. 69.

Kimbrell's theory of the male mystique addresses the same issue. In reference to contemporary life, it represents the disparity between men's real lives and the "macho images of masculinity " exploited by the media. 9 To avoid blaming women for this male confusion, or even society for that matter (society could easily replace women in a contemporary interpretation of Slater's theory), it is necessary to focus on men themselves.

The artist's isolation and study of the self offers a pertinent critique of the male mystique. "The New Politics of Masculinity," from the May/June issue of the Utne Reader, refers to the "recent rediscovery of masculinity as a primal creative and generative force equal to that of the recently recognized creative and nurturing power of the feminine." 10 In the case of artists Schiele and Beckmann, recent begins at the turn of the century.

"The work of Egon Schiele in its totality represents the stoic consciousness of a sensibility that exercised through art the sound nihilism of not making images of world salvation." 11 In this refined definition, Schiele's male nudes represent the classic antitheses of the Herculean archetype. Long gone is the ideal muscular, heroic, youthful male. More examination than celebration, Schiele's male figures are unnaturally colored, emaciated, and

8 Walters, p. 42.

9 Kimbrell, p. 79.

10 Kimbrell, p. 71.

11 Serge Sabarsky, Egon Schiele, (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 27.

introspective. What makes Schiele's art gender specific is his focus on male sexuality.

Two works from the body of Schiele's self-portraits, from what Simon Wilson calls the "sexual angst" series, represent more than a new image of man, they address Kimbrell's male mystique some eighty years earlier. Again, the main characteristics of Kimbrell's "new man" were autonomy, efficiency, intense self-interest, and dissociation from community and earth. It is no irony that these traits characterize turn-of-the-century Vienna, it is merely factual, as evident in Karl Kraus' statement that the twentieth century began the "last days of mankind."¹²

Self-Portrait Masturbating, 1911 (figure 3), and Nude Self-Portrait, 1910 (figure 4), poignantly reflect a search for male sexual identity. Compositionally, both maintain Schiele's figure-(non) ground relationship, where the figure is isolated against a non-referential space. Hence, the figure relies on itself, separate from time and space, community and earth. "The cancellation of the background intensifies the anthropomorphic presence and thereby makes all relations with the world impossible." ¹³

In Self-Portrait Masturbating, the figure makes a gesture to cover his genitals and transforms them to symbolize female genitals, thus setting up a potential ambiguity in the recognition of gender. Simon Wilson suggests that Schiele's use of this kind of sexual ambiguity has a dual significance; one, of the ideal or mythical being beyond humanity, a portion of the classical ideal, and another, the social interpretation that places sexual

¹² Sabarsky, p. 17.

¹³ Sabarsky, p. 23.

abnormality outside of the norm.¹⁴ It is here where Kimbrell's mystique is deflated. Schiele portrayed himself as a man of self-discovery and not as a man of social predetermination.

In Nude Self-Portrait, Schiele approaches the same subject but in a more visceral way. Thought to be one in a series of orgasm drawings, the expressive qualities in the gesture, the sagging facial muscles, raised shoulder and twisted head, and the textured articulation of the surface augment the sensation of "helplessness and dissolution that occur at the moment of orgasm when all consciousness, mental and physical, is lost."¹⁵ The fragmentation of the figure with its missing limbs adds to the suggestion of isolation, where our experience and understanding are beyond social influence. In respect to the male mystique, Schiele's figures exist outside the realm of external influences. They remain in a state of confusion, but it is an internal state of discovery, not denial.

Schiele's self-portraits offer a staggering critique of both classical and modern man. They operate independently of a strictly human level and concentrate on the single issue of his virility.

Max Beckmann's self-portraits offer us a different view of man, one of man in society or of man defined by society. Three paintings, Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927 (figure 5), Self-Portrait in Tails, 1937 (figure 6), and Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket, 1950 (figure 7), display the typical theme in Beckmann's portraits, the sequential revelation of the self.

¹⁴ Simon Wilson, Egon Schiele (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1980), p. 50.

¹⁵ Wilson, p. 30.

What is particularly male about these paintings is described best by a comparison of the same references we looked at in relation to Schiele's works, the classical man versus the modern man.

The classic nude, our Herculean prototype, was often portrayed within the context of his society. Whether in competition or in battle, he was "rarely marked in any way by effort or suffering. Even in the thick of battle, the tense bodies were clear and undistorted." ¹⁶ An emphasis on physical strength and beauty always existed. As seen in the father figure in the Laocoön group, early first century B.C, (?) (figure 8), even in defeat and in the expressions of loss and pain, the male figure remained heroically physical.

In the modern world, this heroism manifests itself in the role of the traditional male and in the pride of his sense of "husbandry of family, community, and land." ¹⁷ Through further modernization and the new image of man, came a false heroism, portrayed by John Wayne and Sly Stallone, that propagated a "power-oriented, individualistic ideology based on the survival of the fittest and the ethic of efficiency." ¹⁸ The second greatest loss to men's independence and dignity was their forfeiture of physical identity with industrialization. Men became expendable. During wartime, hundreds of thousands of young men lost their lives, yet unlike women, men have failed to identify their oppression in society. It is this critical awareness and crucial male point of view that brings Beckmann's work into the context of this discussion.

¹⁶ Walters, p. 38.

¹⁷ Kimbrell, p. 67.

¹⁸ Kimbrell, p. 70.

The three self-portraits span three periods in Beckmann's career marked by social influence. In Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927, he paints himself as the successful man he had become. Frontal, confident, and stable, we see what Stephan Lackner calls, "an individual who is at home in his world."¹⁹ Beckmann's career flourished in the twenties. By 1927, his work had been shown throughout Germany as well as across Europe. A scholarly monograph had been written on him, and he had held a professorship at the Art Academy in Frankfurt.²⁰ At this time, Beckmann painted himself as a commanding figure, who not only dominates the space of the picture plane, but who also dominates that of the viewer. The large, heavy, black shape that makes up the tuxedo powerfully solidifies the artist's position in space and time. Augmented by the geometric configurations of the face and hands, the stability of form reflects the artist's perception of his success.

In 1932, Nazi Germany had begun campaigns against artists working outside the state ideal and by 1937, had labeled many artists, including Beckmann, "Degenerate artists." Works were confiscated and many artists and dissenters went into self-imposed exile to avoid further persecution. Beckmann fled to Holland in 1937. Self-Portrait in Tails, 1937, tells the tale of the artist's fall from grace. Here is a man in an unstable world. The figure remains frontal in order to remain confrontational, but it no longer represents the self-assured man of 1927. The black tuxedo that once rested in solid symmetry is now asymmetrical

¹⁹ Carla Schluz-Hoffman and Judith Weiss, Max Beckmann: Retrospective (New York: W.W. Norton; St. Louis Art Museum, 1984), p. 239.

²⁰ James D. Burke, "Max Beckmann: An Introduction to the Self-Portraits;" in Max Beckmann: Retrospective, Hoffman and Weiss (New York: W.W. Norton; St. Louis Art Museum, 1984), p. 62.

and actively moving out of the picture plane. The figure is painted with large, fleshy hands that seem incapable of doing anything constructive, let alone anything good. Even the space that the figure occupies is representative of this tumultuous time in the artist's career. The staircase and the banister both fail to support the weight of the leaning artist. "An endangered existence, melancholy, and indecisiveness are evident in this portrait of the artist," all of which are powerful manifestations of the affects of social influence. ²¹

In the final years of his life, Beckmann escaped from exile and Nazi occupation to the United States. There he found new success, and in his last self-portrait, Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket, 1950, he painted a man of self-renewal. Stephan Lackner calls this work a "reflective stock-taking of the self." ²² The figure remains frontal, but it no longer forces confrontation. His gaze is contemplative and at ease. He wears the colorful clothes of his new found culture and looks like a man at home again; not at home with the same arrogance of Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, but at home in his chosen profession and in his self-confidence. The space the artist occupies this time is not ambiguous, it regains the compositional stability of the earlier portrait. The most notable change that is evident in this later style is the use of strong outline. The black lines confine and set off forms and areas of color in obvious isolation. The artist is no longer a victim of his space, he exists there separately, willfully, and consciously.

If Kimbrell is correct about the rediscovery of masculinity as a primal creative and generative force, then

²¹ Hoffman and Weiss, p. 261.

²² Hoffman and Weiss, p. 315.

Francesco Clemente could be his contemporary champion artist. Clemente's figurative work and self-portraiture describe the male as a self-reflective and self-explorative being in search of his identity. Edit deAk calls Clemente's image making "meddling in the most haunting issue of our time- the big game hunting of contemporary man- the contest in a hazy land between identity and image." ²³ As seen in the earlier examples of man's new image, the criticism remains that the image has all but replaced the self. Clemente talks of his self-portraits from memory as seeing the body as a place between the external world and the inner world. ²⁴ While he may prefer to call the process a "philosophical visualization" rather than an obsession with the self, the self-portrait remains a central element in his imagery.

Untitled, 1983 (figure 9), is a haunting example of the above. Michael Auping describes Clemente's "memory self-portraits" in an exhibition catalog as "ghost-like protagonists who stare out at the viewer with distinctive almond-eyes, wide-mouth, and short-cropped hair." ²⁵ Untitled is the typical Clemente image, yet the figure is not himself. What we see is the philosophical visualization. The same almond-eyed, wide-mouthed, and short-haired head occupies every visible orifice, and where we see the same head, it is not the same. Each orifice maintains its separate identity because each head in it has its own expression. The main figure's head occupies a semi-ambiguous room, where the walls exist more as voids than as two

²³ Edit deAk, "Chameleon in a State of Grace," Art Forum, 19 No. 6 (1981), pp 36-41.

²⁴ Rainer Crone and Georgia Marsh, An Interview with Francesco Clemente, (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 46.

²⁵ Michael Auping, Francesco Clemente, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), p. 14.

dimensional surfaces. That same mystery is duplicated in the identity of the individual. Clearly the figure is a man, but his image is not what he appears to be. Untitled brings to mind Kimbrell's plea for us not to buy into the "pseudo-male stereotypes propagated by the male mystique, because we are not after all what we are told we are." ²⁶

Clemente's She and She, 1982 (figure 10), curiously offers another conclusion. His image remains the same, and is mirrored by a similar head, but the title refers to the feminine, not the masculine. The androgeny recalls Schiele's Self-Portrait Masturbating. She and She shows us that meeting place between the external self and the internal self. Clemente, as Schiele, exists outside of convention. She and She projects properties of the artist's attitudes towards himself aside from image and stereotype. The ambiguity of androgeny is a direct link to Kimbrell's premise; not in that man should be androgynous, but in challenging the "defective mythology of the male mystique." ²⁷

If we understand the ideograms Clemente calls his works, we can better understand the idea of philosophical visualizations. Each element in an ideogram is a link in a chain of meaning. Never are the elements understood by themselves, it is only in the chain that we can understand them, not for what they are, but for what they remind us of; what they are not. The chain of meaning represents the philosophical question of masculinity. She and She and Untitled are not images of a pseudo-male stereotype, nor are they representative of Clemente himself. They transcend the specific meaning of the male mystique and represent the male

²⁶ Kimbrell, p. 70.

²⁷ Kimbrell, p. 71.

identity on which this paper has focused, the male in question and the male in transition.

Michael Auping also speaks of Clemente's works as "imprese," the true nature of which is the concept that an idea or thing is known for an index of its differences rather than an inventory of its similarities." ²⁸ He provides us with an historical definition of imprese as well: a symbol composed of an image and a motto, serving to express the rule of life or the personal aspirations of its bearer. Italian warriors first drew imprese on their weapons to distinguish their men from the fray and stimulate their courage. ²⁹ In the context of this paper, the works of Schiele and Beckmann can be labeled as imprese too. They are the symbols for a new masculinity from which contemporary society can draw a more realistic portrait of man. There is an undercurrent present in these works that dispels the stereotype of the male mystique and addresses the real problem men face. That underlying theme is awareness, and its concern is representation.

The idea that men are expected to be sensitive to worldly and gender issues creates problems that in themselves are too large to be solved by art alone. If society's focus is on who we should be and what we should be, and if the best representations of ourselves are mere images rather than sincere reflections, then the male mystique will prevail, and the critical issues of gender representation in the arts will remain stereotyped. Style, fashion, and trend, will control our perceptions and forever create new images of men. However, if we wear the impressa of self reflection as a manifesto for men, we can create a sense of personal

²⁸ Auping, p. 16.

²⁹ Auping, p. 16.

affirmation and understanding that will be reflected in our art , towards a new identity of positive masculinity.

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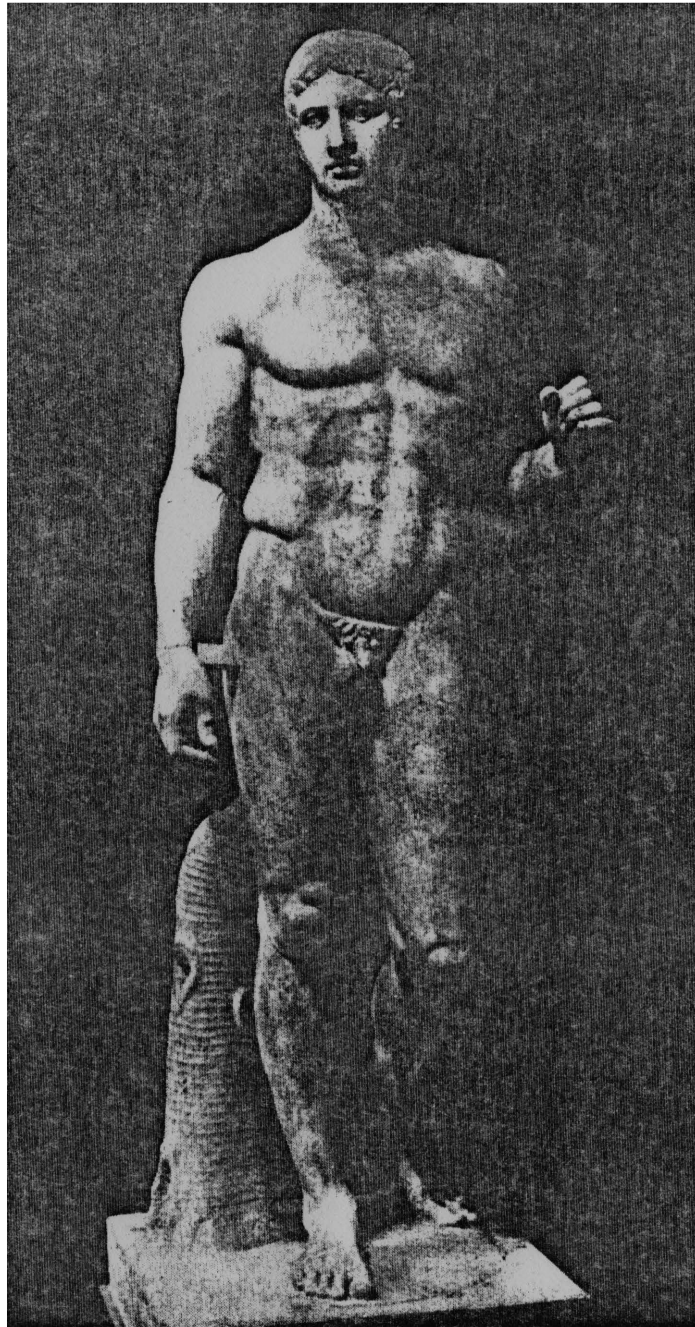


Figure 1. Polykleitos, Doryphoros , 450-440 B.C. . Marble.
Museo Nazionale, Naples.



Figure 2. Michaelangelo Buonarroti, Lorenzo and Giuliano de Medici, 1519-34. Marble. Medici Chapel, Church of San Lorenzo, Florence.

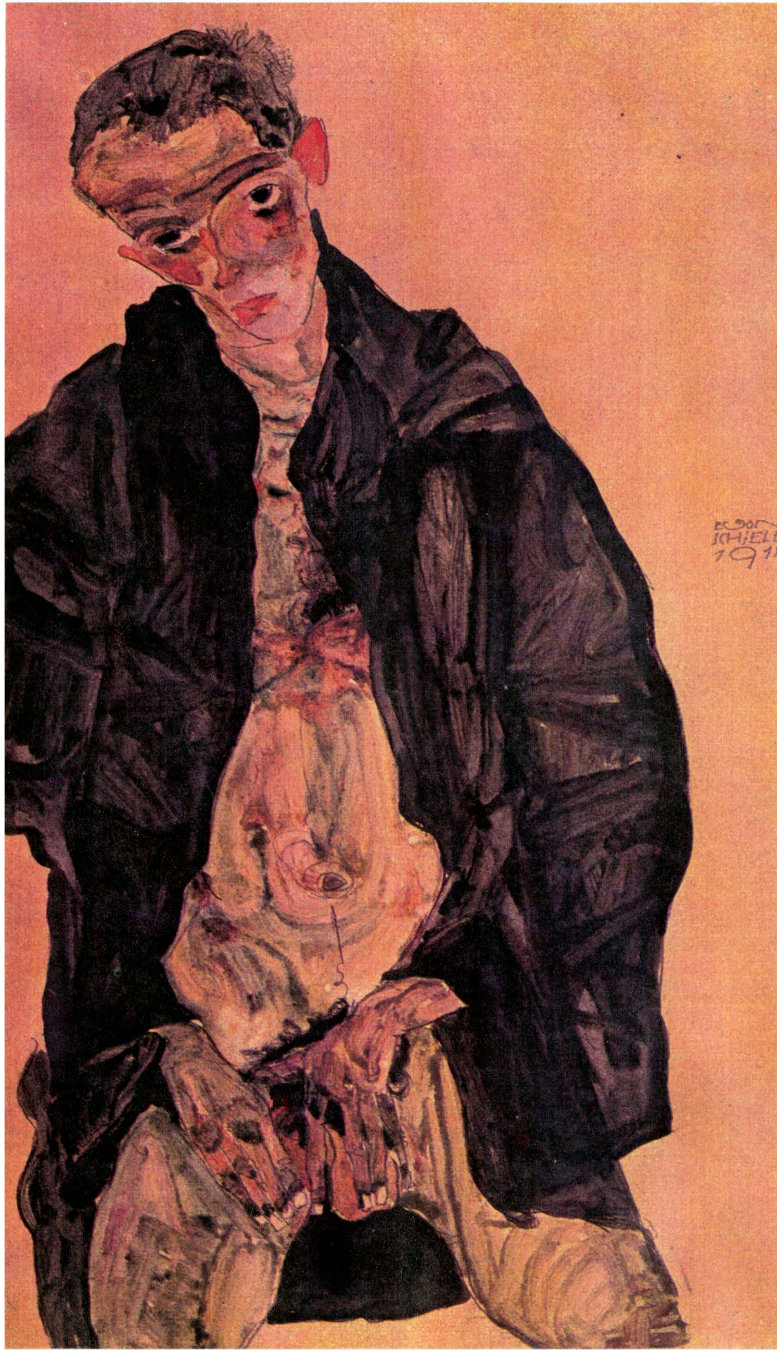


Figure 3. Egon Schiele, Self-Portrait Masturbating, 1911. Pencil on watercolor, 47 x 31 cm.. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 4. Egon Schiele, Nude Self-Portrait, 1910. Pencil, watercolor, gouache, and glue. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 5. Max Beckmann, Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927. Oil on canvas, 141 x 96 cm.. Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, MA.

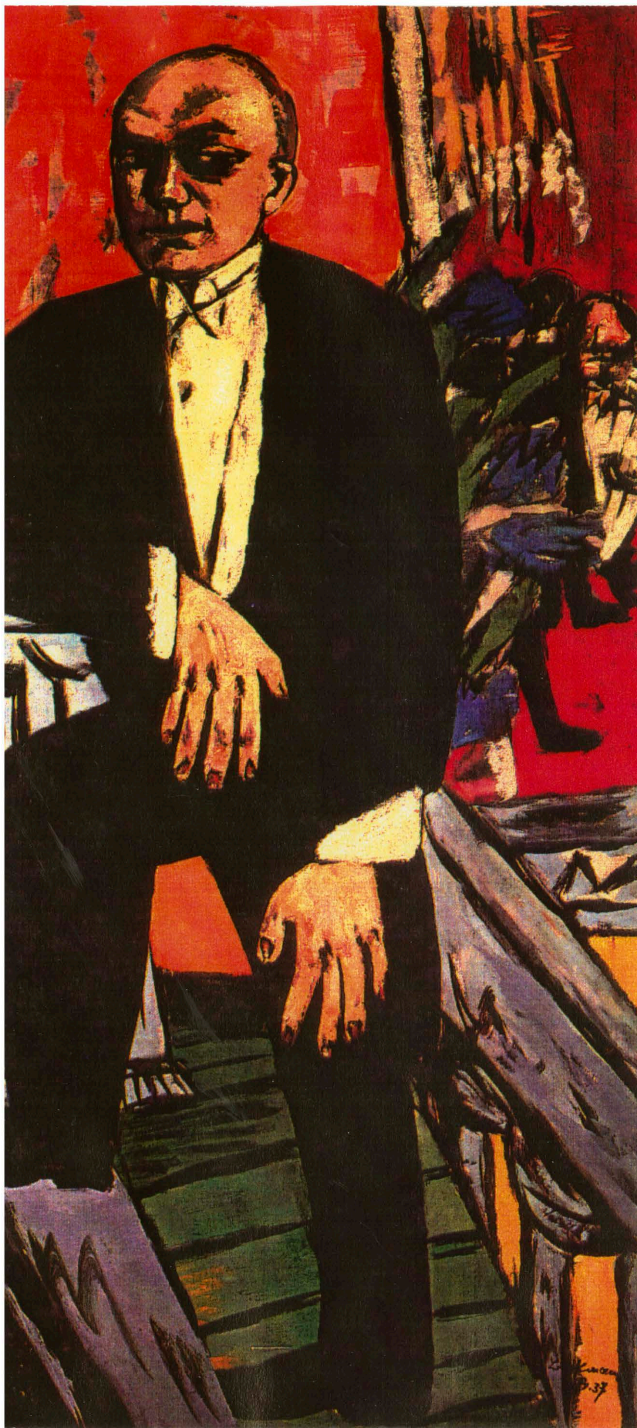


Figure 6. Max Beckmann, Self-Portrait in Tails, 1937. Oil on canvas, 192.5 x 89 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.



Figure 7. Max Beckmann, Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket, 1950. Oil on canvas, 139.5 x 91.5 cm.. St. Louis Museum of Art, St. Louis, MO.

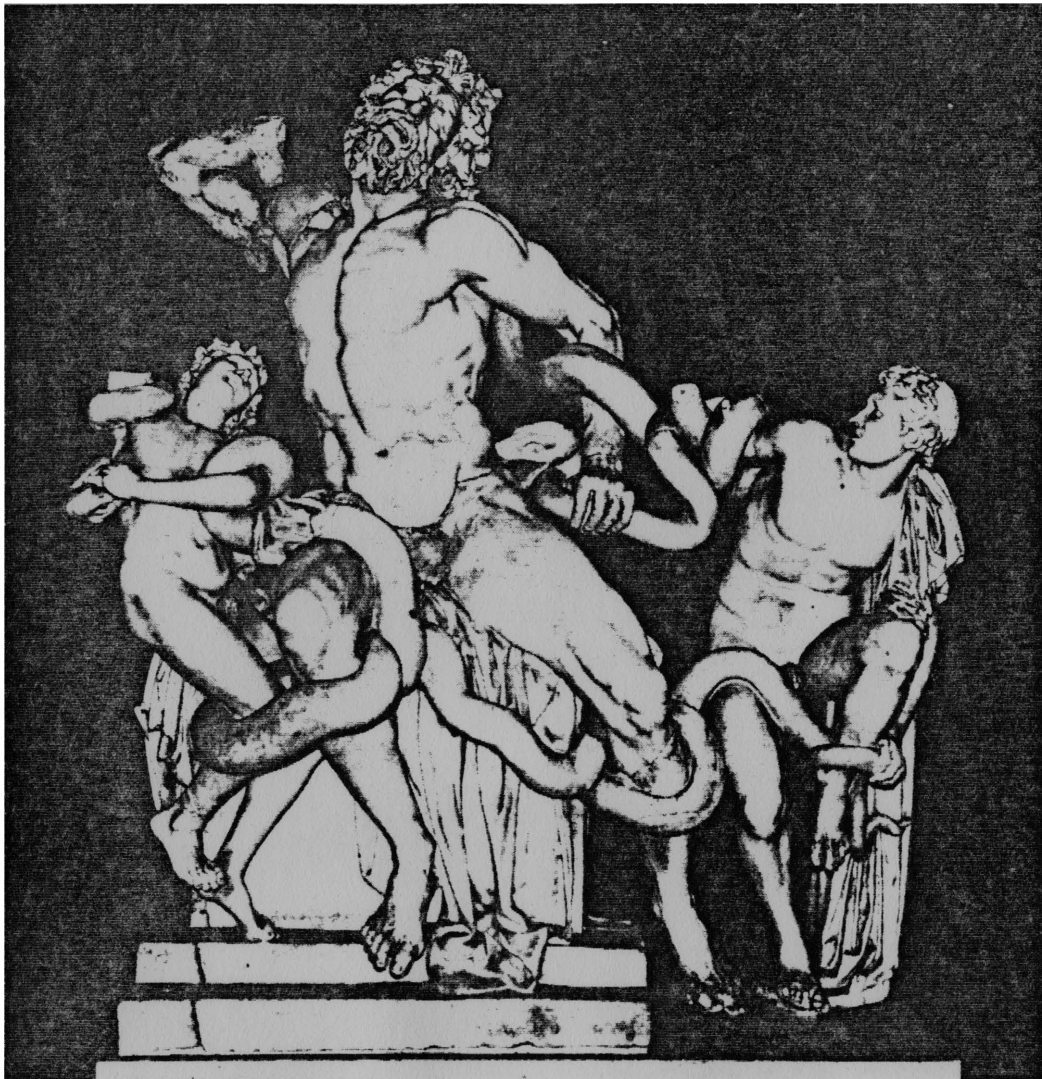


Figure 8. Hellenistic, Laocoön group, early first century B.C. (?). Marble, 8 ft. high. Vatican Museums, Rome.



Figure 9. Francesco Clemente, Untitled, 1983. Oil on canvas, 78 x 93 in.. Collection Thomas Ammann, Zurich.



Figure 10. Francesco Clemente, She and She, 1982. Pastel on paper, 24 x 18 in.. Marx Collection, Berlin.