

ZIRKUSSZENE 1910

CIRCUS SCENE

VLADIMIR VON BECHTEJEFF

oil on carboard on canvas

1910

49.8 x 73 cm / 19 1/2 x 28 3/4 in.

signed lower left

Wladimir von Bechthejeff came back to Munich from Paris in 1909 and immersed himself in the German avant-garde, but always carried the experience of French painting with him. His *Circus Scene* is exemplary of this artistic amalgam that makes Bechthejeff's painting unique. The theme of the circus, albeit a central motif in Classical Modernism, from Kirchner and Heckel to Picasso and Chagall, was particularly close to Bechthejeff: he returned to Russia in 1921, and for a short time he was also the artistic director of the Moscow State Circus. In his painting, created in 1910, Bechthejeff shows a moment in a horse dressage, but the meaning lies in the depiction of an artificial space – and the circus is a place that could not be more artificial – that suggests the harmony of the creatures and the universe.

In Bechthejeff's style of painting, which is characterized in this work by its linear clarity, multiple sources from which the artist draws are recognizable. While a few years earlier Bechthejeff had painted in a manner between Impressionism and Pointillism, as can be seen in his painting *Park Path with Rider* of 1905, he later achieved a prismatic refraction of the image composition and the individual elements. However, colour understood as light plays the central role in the symmetry of the composition, which is slightly shifted from the axis. This is immediately reminiscent of Cézanne and Delaunay, while in the *Park Path with Rider* the influence of the Fauvists is still notably present.

The intense colourfulness of the *Circus Scene*, however, shows the influence of Jawlensky, who had already prompted Bechthejeff to go to Munich in 1902 and whom he joined even closer after his return from Paris in 1909. Bechthejeff belonged to the New Artists' Association until 1912 and participated in its exhibitions. He also belonged to the circle of the Blue Rider, although the influences of French painting never evaporated in his paintings. Bechthejeff is thus on the threshold between French and German Expressionism.

His painting gives form to what Apollinaire called "Orphism", and this term also echoes in the iconography of the image. The dressage scene paraphrases the myth of Orpheus, who attracts and soothes the animals with his beguiling harp playing. The atmosphere of pause that Bechthejeff creates in his painting illustrates Apollinaire's praised term of simultaneity, as a special characteristic of orphic painting. Apollinaire described Orphism with these words:

"Nothing successive in this painting anymore, which is not only made to vibrate by the complementary contrast discovered by Seurat, but in which also each tone evokes and illuminates all other colours of the prism. This is simultaneity."

At the same time, this enraptured scene that Bechthejeff created shows a counter-world that is very close to the escapism and longing for paradise of the German Expressionists.

The reviewer who discusses Otto Fischer's book 'The New Picture', in which Bechthejeff's *Circus Scene* was represented among others, in the weekly 'Art Chronicle' 1913, highlights Bechthejeff's work especially:

"It goes without saying that the level of intensity is not evenly distributed among the members of the group. Bechthejeff and Erbslöh stand out tremendously. With all the force of a male draughtsmanship Bechthejeff moves closer to the conceptual, which is actually outside of art. Therefore, he will probably arouse strange amazement, even admiration, more than joy, love."

The insight and the will that art is a means to access the spiritual beyond the visible, as was the credo of the Blue Rider artists, was formulated by Apollinaire as follows: "Our eyes are the sensuality between nature and our soul."

The year 1910

In 1909, Vladimir von Bechthejeff came to Munich for the second time, after he had come from Moscow in 1902, on the advice of Alexej Jawlensky, to study in Heinrich Knirr's painting school. Thereafter Bechthejeff stayed in Paris for three years and continued his studies in the Atelier Cormon. In Munich Bechthejeff joined the New Artists' Association, whose first group exhibition in the Galerie Thannhauser was received very critically. Until 1911 he participated in the exhibitions of the New Artists' Association. After the group had negative comments on abstract painting, he left the association in 1912 and later became a member of the Munich Secession. Bechthejeff was also very close to the Blue Rider, especially through his connection with Jawlensky. Together with him he donated a painting by van Gogh to the Barmer Kunstverein, where Jawlensky had his first solo exhibition. Due to the First World War, Bechthejeff broke off his artistic career and returned to Russia. He initially worked in completely different areas, until after many vicissitudes in his life he returned to painting.