

THE NAME GAME / WILLY VON BECKERATH

In the auditorium of the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg (HfbK) there is a mural that runs in several panels around the room. It was painted by Willy von Beckerath, then professor of mural painting, between 1912 and 1918, and so for the most part during the First World War,. He signed the main panel, which spans the entire length of the room, at the bottom right corner with his rune-like monogram: a circle sectioned by three symmetrically-disposed vertical lines, the median line having an inverted triangle like the well-known peace symbol (see opposite).

If you take a photograph of this signature, enlarge it and superimpose it onto a reproduction of the next panel (clockwise) in the fresco cycle, it coincides neatly with the composition of the group of three figures there. The scene, which is the most jazzy of the lot, is an allegory of The Dance that conflates imagery of the Three Graces and the Judgment of Paris, featuring an exotic, androgynous figure as pivot (sketches show that the model was a Polynesian dancer from a troupe on tour in Hamburg). This very personal meditation on sexual identity and art as a crossroads seems to have been determined by the irreconcilable realities of the day: a man decorating walls with pastel-colored images of healthy nudes in an art school that had been turned into a military hospital.



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