MAX BECKMANN AND MODERNITY

Joseph Koerner’s essay on the painting by Max Beckmann (“Making Modernity,” November-December, page 44) recalled for me a day in September 1950 when, as a new freshman, I passed the Busch-Reisinger Museum on the way to the biology building. Curious, I entered this unattractive building only to be greeted by wooden Jesus Christ writhing away under their diapers. I had no sympathy for others in pain as I could not understand how I was ever to survive my own travail. I walked up the stairs to the second floor only to be greeted by this incredible man staring down at me. It was a surreal experience which ignited a lifetime of collecting art.

Max has never left my life. Some years ago, I had an artist replicate the painting for me. It now hangs in my winter home as a tribute to a life of art enjoyment. I was gratified recently when one of my granddaughters, touring Harvard, told me elatedly that Harvard owned a painting that was very much like mine.

Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!

Richard Hirschhorn ’54, M.D. ’58
Tucson

SOCIAL PROGRESS INDEX

We are informed by Harvard Magazine (November-December 2015, page 15) that the country with the best “Health and Wellness” (“Do people live long and healthy lives?”) is Peru, while the United States ranks a dismal sixtieth in the world.

This seemed unlikely to me, and so I went to www.socialprogressimperative.org to see how Social Progress Imperative (SPI) arrived at its statistical claims.

The broadest statistic making up the Health and Wellness (HW) rating is Life Expectancy. From the figures, we see that the United States has a life expectancy a full four years longer than that of Peru (78.7 vs. 74.5 years). So how does SPI come to a figure that puts Peru at best in the world? They add other figures related to death, such as “Premature deaths from non-communicable diseases,” which are somewhat higher in the United States than in Peru. But why should we double-count a death from a noncommunicable disease like a heart attack or diabetes, which strikes mostly in advanced nations, but ignore a death from a communicable disease, most of which are more common in poorer nations like Peru?

The HW statistic also includes each country’s obesity rate. This seems reasonable on its face, but the U.S. obesity rate is one reason that U.S. life expectancy isn’t even higher than it is—and to add obesity in separately is to double-count the effects of obesity. Indeed, an obese U.S. person dying before age 70 of a heart attack or other noncommunicable disease is effectively triple-counted against the United States, while a non-obese Peruvian dying at the same age from pneumonia or tuberculosis (which might be more successfully treated in the United States) is not double- or triple-counted.

In short, SPI’s HW statistic makes the U.S. healthcare system look inadequate, but it is not a reasonable measure of countries’ health or of their healthcare systems.

The same article also featured a table showing an “Access to Basic Knowledge” (ABK) statistic. Here the United States was ranked forty-fifth in the world—surprisingly, below Saudi Arabia, which is forty-fifth. But a quick look at the statistics table at the SPI website shows that the...