

PAN

AMSTERDAM

KUNSTHANDEL BOB SCHOLTE FINE ART



British Empire Heavyweight Championship 1920

Joe Beckett vs. Tommy Burns
1920

Chalk, watercolour and gouache on paper
62 × 75 cm

Provenance:

Modern and Contemporary Art, Sotheby's, 09-12-1992.
19th Century & Modern Art, Christies, 13-06-2017.

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Willy Sluiter (1873-1949) was a Dutch painter, draughtsman and illustrator who devoted an important part of his oeuvre to modern public life. Sport, theatre, nightlife and other forms of public entertainment provided him with subjects in which movement, character and social interaction came together. With a fluid and incisive drawing technique, he captured such scenes with clarity and humour.

The same applies to the pair of works Sluiter made in 1920 depicting a boxing match between the British boxer Joe Beckett and the Canadian Tommy Burns. The match took place on 16 July 1920 at the Royal Albert Hall in London and was fought for the British Empire Heavyweight Crown. Beckett, the reigning British heavyweight champion, faced Burns, a former world champion who, at the age of 39, was nearing the end of his career.

Sluiter captured both the decisive moment and its immediate aftermath. In the first work, Beckett advances with a powerful punch while Burns recoils towards the ropes. The audience sits tightly packed around the ring, almost all of them dressed in formal evening attire. Their attention is entirely focused on the two boxers. In the second work, Burns lies defeated on the canvas, with the referee bending over him. By placing these two moments side by side, Sluiter conveys the course of the match at a glance.

What is striking is the direct, almost photographic manner in which Sluiter has rendered the action. The composition is strongly focused on the boxers' bodies and the movement of the decisive punch. The spectators are also an integral part of the image. Their presence underscores the public and spectacular nature of the event. The match between Beckett and Burns was an important boxing contest and received considerable attention in the international press. Sluiter presumably knew of the match through this coverage, which also included several photographs of the fight. The similarities between these press photographs and Sluiter's compositions suggest that such images may have served as visual sources.