

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

An Alley in a Mountain Town, Possibly in the South Tyrol

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Signed Ad. Menzel at the lower left.

203 x 119 mm. (8 x 4 5/8 in.)

Beginning in 1852, Menzel took annual summer trips to towns and resorts in southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and he produced countless pencil drawings of the buildings, sights and local people he encountered. As Irmgard Wirth has noted, '[Menzel's] comprehension of a subject is perhaps the most amazing aspect of his achievement: a natural sympathy for the textural, and above all the three-dimensional qualities of what he is describing, and this is reflected in the countless studies and completed drawings of buildings and architecture. Whether it is an isolated part of a building, the inside or outside of a door, an historical building, or simply a street or square, it is always the vital, the individual and the characteristic that is brought to light. It is as if his hand actually felt along and traced every column and every cornice, so that his eye might absorb the scene in its entirety.'

This drawing, which has been dated by Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher to c.1881-1882, was said to be

the view of a town in the South Tyrol region at the time of its inclusion in the seminal Menzel memorial exhibition held in Berlin in 1905. Among stylistically and thematically comparable drawings by the artist is *An Alley in an Old Town*, dated 1891, in the collection of the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf.

The first owner of the present sheet was the Hamburg collector Gustav Engelbrecht (1848-1923), who began acquiring drawings around 1892. His collection was dominated by the work of 19th century German artists, including a particularly fine selection of drawings by Menzel, and was dispersed at auction in Germany the year after his death. Other drawings by Adolph Menzel from the Engelbrecht collection are today in the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the Museum Georg Schäfer in Schweinfurt and the Albertina in Vienna.

Exhibitions

Berlin, Königliche National-Galerie, Ausstellung von Werken Adolph von Menzels, 1905, no.5282 ('Dorfgasse in Südtirol', lent by Engelbrecht).

Artist description:

Adolph Friedrich Erdmann von Menzel began his career working in his father's lithography shop in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) and later in Berlin, where his family moved in 1830. A brief period of study at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1833 seems to have been the sum total of his formal training, and he is thought to have taught himself how to paint. At the outset of his career he worked as an illustrator, his activity in this field perhaps best exemplified by a series of some four hundred designs for wood engravings produced to accompany Franz Kugler's *History of Frederick the Great*, published in instalments between 1840 and 1842. During the late 1840's and 1850's he was occupied mainly with a cycle of history paintings illustrating the life of Frederick the Great.

In 1861 Menzel received his most important official commission, a painting of *The Coronation of King William I at Königsberg*, on which he worked for four years. In the following decade, his lifelong interest in scenes of contemporary life culminated in what is arguably his masterpiece as a painter; the large canvas of *The Iron Rolling Mill*, painted between 1872 and 1875 and immediately purchased by the National-Galerie in Berlin. The last three decades of his career saw Menzel firmly established as one of the leading artists in Germany, a prominent figure in Prussian society and the recipient of numerous honours including, in 1898, elevation to the nobility. In the late 1880's he began to abandon painting in oils in favour of gouaches, although old age meant that these in turn were given up around the turn of the century. Yet he never stopped drawing in pencil and chalk, able always to find expression for his keen powers of observation. A retrospective exhibition of Menzel's work, held at the National-Galerie in Berlin a few weeks after the artist's death in 1905, included more than 6,400 drawings and almost 300 watercolours, together with 129 paintings and 250 prints.

A passionate and supremely gifted draughtsman, Menzel was equally adept at watercolour, pastel, gouache and chalk. He was also able to draw with either hand, although he seems to have favoured his left. An immensely prolific artist (over four thousand drawings by him, together with 77 sketchbooks, are in the collection of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin alone), it is said that Menzel was never without a sketchbook or two in his pocket. His friend Paul Meyerheim described the artist's appearance: 'In his overcoat he had eight pockets, which were partially filled with sketchbooks, and he could not comprehend that there are artists who make the smallest outings without having a sketchbook in their pocket...an especially large pocket was installed...to hold a leather case, which held a pad, a coupe of shading stumps and a gum eraser.' Menzel was widely admired as a draughtsman by his contemporaries, both in Germany and abroad, and Edgar Degas, for one, is known to have owned at

least one drawing by him.