

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

Studies of a Man Wearing a Hat and Coat and Bending Forward

Charcoal and black chalk, with stumping.

Signed with initials A. M. at the lower right.

211 x 121 mm. (8 3/8 x 4 3/4 in.)

This drawing is a study for the figure of a man helping a woman through a door partially blocked by scaffolding in Menzel's ink and wash drawing of *Painters Preparing a Transparent Panel in the Akademie* of c.1871, today in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin. The drawing depicts a scene in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, during the painting of a series of monumental portraits of generals intended as ephemeral decorations for the facade of the Akademie building on Unter der Linden. These large transparent paintings were intended to be displayed at the time of the triumphal procession of the victorious troops entering Berlin in June 1871, after the end of the Franco-Prussian war. Menzel himself painted two larger-than-life portraits of Otto von Bismarck and General Helmuth von Moltke for this project; these are today in the Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten in Potsdam.

As Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher has described the composition of the Berlin drawing of Painters Preparing a Transparent Panel: 'A kind of scaffold has been built behind a large opening, possibly a door. A plank has been laid across the gap, on which a painter is standing with a paintbrush in his hand, and underneath this a man wearing a hat is helping a woman to bend underneath the plank to get through...The lines seem to have been drawn quickly and vigorously with the thin, hard side of a carpenter's pencil, a technique used only from this late time on. The vague blurred effect of the scene is also characteristic of his last period...' Another preliminary study for the composition is also in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett.

Artist description:

Adolph Friedrich Erdmann von Menzel began his career working in his father's lithography shop in Breslau (now Wroclaw 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.