

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

Study of a Tree

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

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

Inscribed Kat.1609 on the verso.

202 x 125 mm. (8 x 4 7/8 in.)

Adolph Menzel made numerous drawings of trees throughout his long career. As he wrote to his brother-in-law, during one of his travels, 'By the way, the day was, without jest, very beautiful and very interesting due to the really fine stock of trees in this place. I've rarely seen such mighty oaks and beeches as are here.' Although undated studies such as this are difficult to place chronologically within the artist's oeuvre, the present sheet may be tentatively dated to the late 1880s or early 1890s.

This drawing bears, on the verso, the stamp of the Königlichen National-Galerie in Berlin, founded in 1861 and the precursor of today's Nationalgalerie of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. The drawing is known to have entered the collection of the National-Galerie some time before Menzel's death, since it was included in the museum's catalogue of drawings, published in 1902. By the early 1930s, however,

the present sheet had been deaccessioned by the museum, and it was part of a large group of drawings by Menzel, belonging to a private collection in the artist's native city of Breslau, that was dispersed at auction in Berlin in 1932.

Among stylistically comparable drawings of trees by Menzel are two sheets still in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, both dated 1891, as well as a study of a tree trunk in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and another drawing of a tree, dated 1885, in the Karen B. Cohen collection, New York.

Exhibitions

Probably Berlin, Königliche National-Galerie, Ausstellung von Werken Adolph von Menzels, 1905, no.1879 ('Baumstudie'); Munich, Galerie Caspari, Adolph von Menzel 1815-1905: Ölgemälde, Gouachen, Pastelle, Aquarelle und Zeichnungen, 1932, no.40 ('Baumstudie. Bleistift-Zeichnung, bez. A. M., Höhe 20 cm, Breite 12,5 cm. Donop 1609').

Literature:

Lionel von Donop, Katalog der Handzeichnungen Aquarelle und Oelstudien in der Königl. National-Galerie, Berlin, 1902, p.406, no.1609 ('Baumstudie. – Bez. A. M. Papier, Blei, h. 0,302, br. 0,125.', not illustrated).

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 couple 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.