

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

Study of Three Heads

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Laid down.

Signed and dated Ad. Menzel / 98 at the upper right.

310 x 230 mm. (12 1/4 x 9 in.)

As the scholar Michael Fried has recently noted, 'In the mid-1890s...Menzel turned almost exclusively to drawing and began to restrict his subject matter to close-range realistic studies of (mainly older) individual men and women and odd, dreamlike groupings of figures also seen at close range and involved in situations that defy being described narratively or psychologically.'

This unusually large and highly finished drawing by Menzel was commissioned from him by the Akademie der Künste in Berlin as a present for the German sculptor Reinhold Begas (1831-1911), on the occasion of his retirement from teaching at the Akademie in 1898. Menzel and Begas knew each other well; they had both been elected to the senate of the Akademie in 1875, and in the same year Begas produced a portrait bust of Menzel. Twenty years later, in 1895, Begas was commissioned by the Akademie to design a portrait medal of Menzel, in honour of his eightieth birthday, while in 1904 he produced two plaster casts of Menzel's hands, one holding a pencil and the other a paintbrush.

The present sheet may be grouped with a handful of late drawings by Menzel of groups of heads, presented without any obvious narrative context. As the Menzel scholar Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher has written of such drawings, 'Menzel finished a large number of pencil drawings in his last years, right up to his death...He began to draw faces in close proximity to each other, sometimes half-silhouettes, of numerous anonymous men and women he came across here and there in the streets of Berlin or in the restaurants he went to, but also on the trips he undertook...The heads were sometimes brought together in small, apparently spontaneous scenes. They evoke a cinema-like panorama or compel a comparison with photographs in their fragmentary framing. From a technical point of view Menzel shows a total mastery of his art in these picturesque drawings. Working with both subtlety and boldness, he achieved the most skilled art in terms of nuances of grey and black...These drawings are impressions that have taken on form, and portray variations on the theme of alienation by showing the fragile, fortuitous ways in which people coexist or oppose each other.'

This large sheet exemplifies Menzel's distinctive and assured technique, particularly evident in his late drawings, of a combination of pencil and shading stump to achieve remarkable painterly effects. Among stylistically comparable drawings is an undated sheet of studies of heads, of similar dimensions to the present sheet, in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin.

The present sheet was reproduced and published as a photogravure or collotype by Meisenbach Riffarth & Co. in Berlin. This drawing was lent by Reinhold Begas to the seminal memorial exhibition of Menzel's oeuvre held, a few weeks after the artist's death, at the National-Galerie in Berlin in 1905.

Exhibitions

Berlin, Lehrter Bahnhof, Grosse Berliner Kunst-Ausstellung, 1899; Berlin, Königliche National-Galerie, Ausstellung von Werken Adolph von Menzels, 1905, no.5248 ('Drei Studienköpfe', lent by Begas).

Literature:

Max Jordan, Das Werk Adolf Menzels, Munich, 1905, illustrated p.99; Max Jordan, Das Werk Adolf Menzels, 1895-1905: II. Nachtrag dem Hauptwerke, Munich, 1905; pl.6; Peter Betthausen et al, Adolph Menzel 1815-1905: Master Drawings from East Berlin, exhibition catalogue, New York and elsewhere, 1990-1991, p.219, under no.77; Claude Keisch and Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher, ed., Adolph Menzel: Briefe, Berlin and Munich, 2009, Vol.3 (1881 bis 1905), p.1373, under no.1878, note 1.

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.