

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

Head of an Old Woman with a Shawl

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Signed with initials and dated A.M./ 94 at the lower right.

210 x 130 mm. (8 1/4 x 5 1/8 in.)

In his last years, Adolph Menzel lived an increasingly reclusive life, rarely leaving his studio at Sigismundstrasse 3 in Berlin, where he worked from 1875 until his death. As one early biographer noted of the artist, 'There he lived, visited by only a few close friends, on the fourth floor; his studio was on the fifth. On the landing, one could encounter old, ugly models, 'character heads', which he preferred for practice in these late years.' Menzel's abiding interest, in the 1890s, was the human countenance, and his output was dominated by pencil drawings of heads and busts of figures. To this end, he employed a steady stream of amateur models, often old men and women off the street. The artist was attracted, no doubt, to the expressive faces of the elderly, which were full of character.

As the Menzel scholar Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher has commented, 'Pencil is used in the most diverse manifestations in these exercises, from the finest and most delicate line to rough assaults which tear the surface of the paper... It was not individual destiny that he portrayed in these faces, but rather

something universally human which he tried to grasp in fascination, like feelings which translated both the image and its reflection...His encounters with these people, mostly elderly and of modest means, was one of Menzel's last essential human experiences.'

The old woman seen in this drawing must have been of particular interest to Menzel, as she appears in several other drawings by the artist. A study of the same woman, dated 1891, is in the Kunsthalle in Bremen, while the model reappears in a drawing of three old women of 1892, today in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin.

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.