

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

An Old Man with His Head Turned Away

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Signed with initials and dated A.M./ 89 at the lower right.

206 x 128 mm. (8 1/8 x 5 in.)

A page from a sketchbook, this is one of a group of late drawings by Adolph Menzel of, to quote one scholar, 'men and women viewed at close range and focussing mainly on their heads and upper bodies...Technically, the drawings are extremely fine and mark a final phase...in Menzel's relation to his primary medium. All were executed in carpenter pencil and stump, in a wide range of values from the deepest, grainiest black – the lead being particularly soft – through the subtlest and softest grays, made by rubbing with stump or fingers, to the white of the paper.' Many of these drawings depict their subjects from an odd or unexpected angle; either from above or below or, as in the present sheet, from behind.

The present sheet was once part of the exceptional collection of drawings by Menzel assembled by the Viennese industrialist Moritz Edler von Kuffner (1854-1939). In May 1938 thirteen Menzel drawings from the Kuffner collection were requested by the Albertina in Vienna, which sought to prevent their export by

the family. (A further group of drawings by Rudolf von Alt from the same collection were also appropriated by the State, intended for the planned Führermuseum in Linz.) In July of the same year, however, twelve of the thirteen Menzel drawings were returned to the family by the Albertina. Shortly thereafter the Kuffner family emigrated to Zurich, where Moritz died the following year.

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.