

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

A Man with a Birdcage

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Signed with initials and dated AM. / 83 at the lower right.

212 x 122 mm. (8 3/8 x 4 3/4 in.)

This drawing is likely to be a study for a figure intended, but never used, for Adolph Menzel's large painting of *The Piazza d'Erbe in Verona* (also known as *The Marketplace in Verona*), in the *Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister* in Dresden. Painted between 1882 and 1884, the canvas depicts a marketplace crowded with figures in a market square in the centre of the Italian city of Verona. Menzel made brief visits to Northern Italy in the summers of 1881, 1882 and 1883, spending some time in Verona on each trip, and the painting was begun after the second of these visits.

The composition of the painting includes, to the left of centre, the prominent figures of two bird traders, one of whom holds a pole to which is attached a flying bird, while the other, also equipped with a bird on a pole, can be seen climbing up the side of a white market umbrella in order to prod his resting bird into

flight. The figure depicted in the present sheet is likely to have been related to these bird traders. Although he does not appear in the final work, at least one other drawing of what appears to be the same man is known, in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, while his distinctive hat seems to have been used for the man seated in a horse-drawn cart at the right side of the painting.

As one modern writer has noted of the painting, 'the laborers, vendors, shoppers, beggars, and children that populate this canvas come across as picturesque and often bizarre "characters" – typical specimens of the frequenters of the market at the Piazza d'Erbe – which is to say that they seem to have been viewed and portrayed by a perhaps not unsympathetic but fundamentally detached observer.' Other studies of birdsellers in Verona appear in a sketchbook of 1881-1882, now in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin.

The present sheet was included in the 1965 Arts Council travelling exhibition 'Drawings and Watercolours by Adolph Menzel', to which it was lent by the German art dealer Wilhelm Weick.

Exhibitions

London, The Arts Council Gallery, and elsewhere, Drawings and watercolours by Adolph Menzel, 1965, no.78 (as Old Labourer).

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 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.