

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

A Woman Holding an Umbrella

Carpenter's pencil, with stumping.

Signed with initials and dated A. M. / 82. at the lower right.

204 x 127 mm. (8 x 5 in.)

This is a preparatory study for the figure of an elegantly-dressed woman, accompanied by a man holding an umbrella, seen to the left of centre of Menzel's large painting of *The Piazza d'Erbe in Verona*, painted between 1882 and 1884 and today in the *Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister* in Dresden. This 'family group of upper-class tourists... a man, a woman, and small girl, all grotesquely overdressed and seemingly outraged or alarmed by the activities of the natives', as described by one writer, is especially prominent within the composition, since they seem to be caught in a shaft of sunlight as they are confronted with children doing handstands.

As the Menzel scholar Claude Keisch has described the large canvas, 'The painter exaggerates the already known principle... of 'assembling' elements (figures, groups, areas of space) so that each retains an autonomous existence... All the little everyday catastrophes to which Menzel has accustomed us in his paintings are multiplied here, the most noticeable being the misfortune of the couple of well-off foreign travellers frightened by the rough acrobatics of some boys.' And, as another writer has described this group, 'On the left of the composition, two English tourists are easily picked out by their

light clothing. They are trying to fend off a group of pushy street urchins performing cartwheels and somersaults by hitting them with their umbrellas. Who else but the English would carry an umbrella in this weather?’

Other preparatory drawings by Menzel for the same figure of a female English tourist include a costume study, dated 1883, in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, and a study of the woman's left hand in the Städtische Wessenberg-Galerie in Konstanz. A drawing of the woman's head was formerly in the extensive collection of Menzel drawings belonging to Gustav Henneberg in Zurich and sold at auction in Germany in 1903, while a study of her upper body and head was also in the Henneberg collection and appeared at auction in Germany in 1903 and 1912.

A thumbnail sketch of the present sheet is found in a drawing by Menzel, containing small sketches recording twenty-four of his individual figure studies for the Piazza d'Erbe painting, in the collection of the Museum der Stadt Nürnberg in Nuremberg.

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.