Fried, Michael: *Menzel's realism. Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, New Haven, Conn. [u.a.]: Yale University Press 2002
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"Berlin's Salons are irregular; there is no special exhibition hall. For some years, in fact, there has been no Salon at all. Admission is 50 centimes. It would be out of keeping to speak here of German art. With the exception of that extraordinary genius, Adolph Menzel, this art is inferior to that of France, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Spain."[1]

Thus wrote Jules LaForgue, the French tutor to the Prussian Empress Augusta when he resided in Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century. His evaluation of German painting of the period has been surprisingly resilient. Michael Fried, J. R. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins University and author of works on 18th century French drawing, Édouard Manet, Charles Eakins and Gustave Courbet, has provided a bold, even audacious, yet convincingly original perspective on 19th century Germany's foremost but still-obscure artist, Adolph Menzel (1815- 1905). In it, he desires not only to acknowledge that which LaForgue observed about Menzel over one hundred years ago, but Fried also wishes to recover some of the complexity of 19th century European art more generally. Too often art historians and critics have presented simplistic dichotomies of French aesthetic domination and originality in contrast to German artistic inferiority and derivativeness.

Like LaForgue, others of the time praised Menzel. For example, the important French critic, Edmond Duranty, wrote extensively about the artist in a series of articles detailing some of Menzel's key paintings, as Fried describes in his account (125-139). Max Liebermann, turn-of-the century Germany's influential impressionist painter, regarded Menzel as a great "genius." [2]

So too, the 19th century German realist novelist Theodor Fontane, known for his often-sardonic portrayals of contemporary Prussian life in Imperial Germany, ("Frau Jenny Treibel" or "Effi Briest", discussed by Fried in chapter 10) greatly admired Menzel. Fontane penned an affectionate poem on the occasion of the painter Adolph Menzel's seventieth birthday in 1885. In it he queried, "Indeed, who is Menzel? Menzel is many things, if not everything; he is in any case a great Noah's ark, animal and human being"[3] We, too, can ask: who, indeed is Menzel? The vast majority of his paintings and drawings reside in German, primarily Berlin museums. Outside the Federal Republic his name is virtually unknown, despite an important and comprehensive 1996- 1997 exhibition held in Paris (d'Orsay) and Washington, DC (National Gallery of Art) before the traveling show concluded in Berlin. There has, until now, been no major English-language book-length biography or analysis published. While a number of art historians and historians have written very insightfully about Menzel, his art, and political ideas, in particular Claude Keisch, Françoise Forster-Hahn and Peter Paret, Americans, indeed, most non-Germans know little if anything about the artist's vast output during his long and productive life (1815- 1905).[4] This is the case despite the fact that

when one encounters Menzel's art, one reacts like Michael Fried, and is taken aback by the sheer range of subjects, the incredible draughtsmanship, and the vast quantities of marvelous drawings and prints the artist created during his long life. Fried wonders why the art historical community has not properly appreciated Menzel.

His creative evocation of Menzel's artistic genius offers much food for thought and reflection. Rather than offer a traditional biography, Fried proceeds from an important vantage-point in his analysis by dissecting, surveying, and in innumerable ways intensely looking at the art and at Menzel's methods of painting and drawing. In his original approach to the works, Fried's also departs from recent and even 19th and early 20th century critics and art historians who have analyzed Menzel's oeuvre.

Menzel's art has often been viewed through the lens of 18th and 19th century German politics. This has been the case because many of the painter's works dealt with the life of the 18th century enlightened Prussian ruler, Frederick the Great. Menzel also witnessed and recorded historic events of his own time-from the revolutions of 1848 to the wars of German unification during the 1860s to 1871. Fried's analysis of Menzel's art begins with the works themselves and their relationship to the artist's sense of reality. The painter physically was gnome-like and extremely short, probably about four and a half feet with a head proportionately far larger than his body. Like the French artist Toulouse-Lautrec who also was extremely small, the artist appeared to view the world from a position of an outsider-confining his close relationships to family members and very few intimate friends. He never married. Fried's central and compelling contention is that "Menzel's enterprise involved countless acts of imaginative projection of bodily experience" (13) that the author defines as "embodiment." In other words, when viewing a painting, drawing, or gouache, Menzel is asking the viewer to project him or herself into the work and understand its total reality and complexity as Menzel himself saw it. This means that the act of viewing is as difficult and as fraught with visual problems as was the act of creating the work of art itself. For one can never entirely see reality in both minute, almost microscopic detail and, simultaneously, in broad, sweeping outline. In his attempt to grasp the totality of detail, Menzel's work, according to Fried, achieves a sort of unity which most critics heretofore discounted or neglected. Whereas many critics, contemporary to Menzel and more recently, have seen his realist portrayals of contemporary history as busy, fussy, and much too cluttered with details, Fried counters with the view that Menzel's art requires "the primacy of empathic projection in the making and viewing of his art." (17) He also argues that "the mode of temporality.is basic to Menzel's art," (144)

Thus, given Fried's assertion that Menzel's "feats of projection" are central to an understanding of his art, the author then argues that his historical paintings and drawings of the life of Frederick the Great, or his contemporary paintings of recent Prussian history, such as "The Departure of Wilhelm I", (1871), are no less important in the comprehension of Menzel's conception of "depiction" than Menzel's critically-acclaimed "private" pictures of family and 'buergerliche' life. Most recent commentators have attempted to 'read' extra aesthetic ideas into Menzel's painting. Fried wants the reader and viewer to re-experience the visual conundrums Menzel faced when approaching a subject - be it a moving train, fluttering curtains gently blown by a breeze, Frederick the Great encouraging his soldiers before battle, or Prussian aristocrats gamely attempting to balance their buffet plates at a glittering ball.

Fried's discussion counters much of the analysis of nineteenth French painting and its contrast to German art of the same period. Many art historians have traditionally analyzed French painting of the mid-century by formal internal description. In the last two decades have art historians increasingly read extra aesthetic "narrativizing" ideas into the paintings (one thinks of Robert Herbert's "Impressionism Art, Leisure and Parisian Society" or Patricia Mainardi's "Art and Politics of the 2nd Empire"). Given the burden of German history climaxing during the Nazi era, art historians writing about German painting, even painting of the 19th century, have often privileged politics before formally analyzing works of art on their own terms. Or, inevitable comparisons to French art of the period have rendered German art wanting, represented by the observations of Jules Laforgue, or, at the turn of the century, by the art critic Julius Meier-Graefe. The latter provided a paradigm for such a negative interpretation of German painting when he noted that Menzel's "private paintings" of family and unassuming subjects such as diaphanous curtains were far superior to the artist's public works of Prussian history. This was the case, according to this still-influential reading, because Menzel's private paintings exhibited 'malerische' characteristics close to French realism and impressionism whereas the public paintings assumed an anecdotal, disparate and confusing totality.

What Fried asks the reader to do is to actively and carefully scrutinize Menzel's paintings and remove the burdensome preconceptions of French visual modernism as well as contextual German political developments during the artist's lifetime. He thus wants us to use fresh eyes to understand one of the most prolific and interesting painters of the 19th century. He makes very telling points about the differences between Menzel's angle of vision in very literal sense, and the French classicizing mode of depiction: "French painting throughout the nineteenth century remained essentially classical in its mode of constructing an illusion of spatial depth, by which I mean that in the works of generations of major painters.this was done by delineating a succession of planes all of which ran parallel to the picture plane and were stepped back into the distance by measurable degrees." (81) The conclusion Fried draws is that the French model has "effectively determined the basic pictorial expectations of countless viewers of paintings [from Poussin through Seurat].with the result that Menzel's fundamentally disparate approach to the pictorial representation.runs the risk of appearing eccentric, marginal, minor.but without deeper significance." (82) Fried's important contribution, among many, is therefore to conflate Menzel's private and public paintings-the latter often praised while the public, historical canvases were frequently disparaged as anecdotal, crowded with a too-varied assortment of details and decidedly 'unmodern' in subject matter. Fried takes vehement issue with this public-private sphere dichotomy.

While Fried asks the reader to bear with him as he grapples with the aesthetic and philosophical implications of Menzel's art, on occasion the reader become frustrated. This is because the author has a tendency to begin a description and then point out that: "later in this book I shall analyze," or "about which I shall have more to say..." or "this is not the place for a detailed exposition..." which presents the reader with a feeling of some improvisation on Fried's part. At other times, the author frustrates the reader by indulging in self-referential digressions, comparing and contrasting Menzel to two other important 19th century realists, Courbet and Eakins (about whom Fried had earlier written). Here his arguments are occasionally difficult to follow and contain convoluted prose. One example may suffice:

"I do not pretend that so brief a summary of a complicated argument can be fully perspicuous (it is also partial, but that is another story). What I want to stress is the idea that the viewer posited by Eakin's art- and as with Courbet, indeed as must always be the case, in the first instance that viewer can only have been the painter himself-is both embodied and in a state of considerable uncertainty with respect to his or her imagined position in front of the painting as well as to the mode of seeing that the latter seeks to elicit." (111)

He does not always convince the reader of such comparability between Menzel and his American and French realist contemporaries. However he maintains that: "each of the nineteenth century three arch-realists felt compelled on one or more occasions to reflect allegorically on the nature of his art, as if the obsessive particularity of their respective projects demanded to be given explicit expression this way." (117) In several sections of his analysis Fried's questioning of what he sees and how he interprets the paintings obscures rather than clarifies his position. He continually engages in dialogues with a variety of critics and writers, ranging from Walter Benjamin to Georg Simmel, to Emerson and Thoreau to Jacques Lacan. Much of his analysis is based, not on original research, but re-investigating the claims of others who have grappled with the enigmas that were Menzel's (art historians such as Werner Hofmann, Françoise Forster-Hahn, Claude Keisch). Yet, I am not persuaded by all of Fried's re-readings of some of the works discussed. For example, one may take issue with his description of the "Iron Rolling Mill". Fried asserts that the painting contains in part: "more than a hint of a castration scenario not only in the violent actions of the workers but also in the implication that the cast iron's passage through or rather under the laminating cylinder will subject it to further bodily assault." (121) In another section, Fried's long disquisition on Menzel's aesthetic relationship to Kieerkegaard's philosophy of the everyday (pp. 141-152) could have been more economically and cogently rendered.

But there are other times when the author provides very thick descriptions and analyses of works and firmly convinces the reader of his interpretation. Among his many fresh insights are his comments about Menzel's preoccupation with recent technology, such as speeding trains, binoculars (there are long discursive ruminations about the "ocular"), steel forges, and the mechanisms of bicycles, all new technology of the 19th century.[5] Especially forceful are his discussions of Menzel's "Rear Courtyard and House" (1844) and "Crown Prince Frederick Pays a Visit to the Painter Pesne on His Scaffold at Rheinsberg" (1861), the latter Fried sees as the penultimate allegory of his aesthetic enterprise. In sum, Menzel's Realism will engage the careful reader. The volume will also exasperate with its frequent digressions and opaque prose. But ultimately the book will most certainly elevate our understanding of one of the nineteenth century's truly spectacular artists and give the painter the recognition that is he so richly deserves.

Notes:

[1] Jules Laforgue, Berlin, The City and the Court, (Intro. And trans. William Jay Smith, New York, 1996), 199.

[2] See his discussion in: Max Liebermann, "Menzel," in his Die Phantasie in der Malerei, Schriften und Reden, (Frankfurt, 1978), 130-145.

[3] Quoted in Peter-Klaus Schuster, "Menzel's Modernity," in Adolph Menzel, Between Romanticism and Impressionism, [Exhibition Catalogue, National Gallery of Art] (Washington, DC 1996-97), 139.

[4] Among the English language art historians and historians analyzing Menzel's work are: Françoise Forster-Hahn, Peter Paret, and Christopher With. See, among many of Forster-Hahn's articles: "Adolph Menzel: readings between nationalism and modernity," in Adolph Menzel: Between Romanticism and Impresionism., pp. 103-112. Her 1977 Art Bulletin article, "Adolf Menzel's 'Daguerrotypical' Image of Frederick the Great: A Liberal Bourgeois Interpretation of German History" (Vol. 59), 242-261, remains a landmark in bringing English-language attention to the painter. Peter Paret has also offered trenchant comments on Menzel in his Art as History: Episodes in the Culture and Politics of Nineteenth Century Germany (Princeton, NJ, 1988), especially pp. 13-104, and in his recent German Encounters with Modernism, 1840-1945 (Cambridge, UK, 2001), pp. 7- 44. See also, Christopher With, "Adolf von Menzel and the German Revolution of 1848," Zeitschrift fuer Kunstgeschichte (Vol. 42, 1979), 195-214, and his unpublished Ph.D dissertation: "Adolph von Menzel: A Study in the Relationship between Art and Politics in Nineteenth Century Germany," UCLA, 1975. Claude Keisch, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, masterfully curated the Menzel show and edited its catalogue along with Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher.

[5] For some strange reason, the extended discussion of one of Menzel's key paintings dealing with technology, Iron Rolling Mill (1875) is accompanied by a small, muddied reproduction (p. 118) that is barely decipherable on the printed page. Hence several of Fried's arguments cannot effectively be advanced without a clearer image to observe. Most of the accompanying illustrations in the volume are superb, so the poor quality of this critical work is surprising.

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