Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide
a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin by Michael Fried

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003)

Citation: Rachel Esner, book review of *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* by Michael Fried, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn03/menzels-realism-art-and-embodiment-in-nineteenth-century-berlin-by-michael-fried.

Published by: Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art

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Michael Fried
Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002
320 pp.; 100 b/w ills.; 70 color ills.; index; $55.00 (cloth)
ISBN 0300092199

While recent exhibitions of his work in Paris and Washington served to bring Adolph Menzel's art to audiences beyond the borders of his native land, and the writings of Françoise Forster-Hahn and Peter Paret helped make him known to British and American scholars, until now there has been no comprehensive study in English of his remarkable and vast oeuvre. Rich in insight and beautifully produced, with large illustrations in both black and white and color, Michael Fried's *Menzel's Realism* goes toward filling this gap, despite its idiosyncrasies. This is no biography or monograph in the traditional sense; the author's approach is thematic rather than chronological; he often springs from one topic to another —a bit like Menzel himself—and his digressions are numerous (the parenthetical remarks and asterisks are particularly distracting). For the reader unfamiliar with the material, this can be frustrating or confusing, but the end result is a picture of this somewhat misunderstood and extraordinarily prolific artist that is so multifaceted that one is tempted to forgive Fried his various sins against academic convention.

This latest book by Fried picks up on and continues what has clearly become his lifetime project, namely the rewriting of the history of art since the Enlightenment from a critical perspective that privileges the body and its sensual experience over the all-seeing, transcendent eye. This approach to Menzel's art represents a significant departure from other authors, who have tended to analyze his works mainly within the context of nineteenth-century German history and politics. This aspect is of no interest to Fried, who, when he looks to non-artistic forces that may have been at work in Menzel's paintings and drawings, tends to find them instead in literature and contemporary philosophy. This provides a fresh view of his oeuvre, no doubt, but may in its way be as limiting as the purely contextualizing method adopted by his predecessors.

Fried's key assertion is that "Menzel's enterprise involved countless acts of imaginative projection of bodily experience, the signs of which are plainly visible in his [art]; put more strongly, the viewer of Menzel's work…is repeatedly invited to perform feats of imaginative projection not unlike those that gave rise to the paintings and drawings in the first place…" (p. 13). What Menzel was aiming for in all his works, whether they show something as real and everyday as the artist's unmade bed, or as imagined and historically weighty as Friedrich II's generals before a battle, are these effects of embodiment. The responsive viewer can imagine the objects he so accurately depicts in use, exactly how they would feel in the hand or against the skin, or can project him or herself into the scene portrayed. And, indeed, in Fried's descriptions of Menzel's works the reader does experience just these sensations. This is perhaps the book's greatest strength: the careful acts of *looking* performed on these pictures are at times quite breathtaking, and reveal the author's true empathy for the artist and his creations. He (and we with him) seems almost hypnotized by the variety of things that caught Menzel's attention, by his extraordinary technical abilities, and not least by the "reenchantment" (p. 232) of the modern world that takes place in his art—here

conceived as something positive, rather than as a form of commodification (*à la* Walter Benjamin; see section 14 in the book).

Somewhat more problematic than these compelling and often brilliant analyses of individual works as physical projections of the artist's body and sense of reality are Fried's attempts to link Menzel to various philosophers and writers—of his day and ours. Although undoubtedly apposite, his disquisition on Kierkegaard's philosophy of the everyday (pp. 141–52) is a bit long-winded; the postscript on Fontane's *Effi Briest* (pp. 161–65) in section 10 seems unconnected to what went before; and the long quotations from Franz Kafka and W.G. Sebald at the end of the book, while poetic, strike one as superfluous. At times Fried appears engaged in a rather insular debate with his colleagues T. J. Clark and Jonathan Crary, more interested in disproving them than in adding anything positive to our knowledge of Menzel. Particularly disturbing, because so unlike his other careful and internally cogent readings, is the application of psychoanalytic theory to the *Iron Rolling Mill*, which he sees as containing "more than a hint of a castration scenario" (p. 121). Fried is more convincing in his linking of Menzel with the two other major realists of the period, Courbet and Eakins, demonstrating that they, too, were concerned with issues of embodiment and, like Menzel, painted pictures that can be read as allegories of their respective art-making enterprises (see section 8).

Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of Fried's notion of embodiment as fundamental to Menzel's art is that it serves to reunite his grand public works—those dealing with Prussian history, both of the period of Frederick the Great and his own time (for example, *The Flute Concert* or the *Coronation of King William I at Königsberg*)—with the so-called "private" pictures, such as the famous *Balcony Room*, the Hamburg *Studio Wall*, or *Rear Courtyard and House*. It was Julius Meier-Graefe in the early twentieth century who first introduced the enduring dichotomy between these two segments of the artist's oeuvre, regarding the Menzel of the "private" pictures as a harbinger of impressionism, a modernist painter in the thoroughly French sense that the critic championed in his other writings, while rejecting his so-called "official" work in its entirety. As Fried convincingly demonstrates in section 7, French art—even that of the impressionists—is based on a classical paradigm that privileges the picture plane, and, he argues, this "modernist thematization of the picture plane…has effectively determined the basic pictorial expectations of countless viewers of paintings…" (p. 82). This has, in effect, made it impossible to appreciate Menzel's fundamentally different approach to pictorial representation. Rather than revealing themselves to us all at once, his works—every single one—require "a combination of extremely close looking and projective imagination" (p. 82), in short: physical and mental empathy. Fried hereby exposes the unconscious visual prejudices that have prevented Menzel, with important exceptions, from becoming the object of in-depth art-historical examination, perhaps from being taken seriously as an important nineteenth-century artist at all. Fried's book, then, will, one hopes, open up a whole new era in Menzel studies.

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