

Adolph Menzel and 19th Century History Painting

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I

In the context of the rise of modernism, history painting has consistently been denounced as backward and old-fashioned in two respects: as a genre that derives its subject matter from the past, and as a genre that no longer acts in accordance with the spirit of its time. This second aspect in particular was essential in creating the negative reputation that history painting began to acquire rapidly in the later decades of the 19th century: “Il faut être absolument moderne,” that famous phrase of Arthur Rimbaud’s that leading exponents of the modern period had prefigured in many variations and had subsequently taken up with great vigour, seems to preclude any form of artistic historicization.

Nonetheless, when we study nineteenth-century definitions and practices of history painting in greater detail, we notice that things are more complicated than that. Even such an apparently conservative phenomenon as history painting contained modern elements; indeed, it ultimately seemed to affirm the modern rather than displaying an antagonism towards it. I understand “the modern” here in the sense of Reinhart Koselleck, who regarded a radical openness towards the future and the temporalization of history as the fundamental characteristics of the period under investigation.¹ The painter at the centre of my argument is Adolph Menzel (1815–1905), (Fig. 1) an artist who has attracted increased international attention since a huge show in Berlin, Washington and Paris in the late 1990s.²

¹ R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979; translated as Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985. [Author’s note: In Koselleck’s explanatory system, this openness to the future and temporalization of history set in after what he calls the *Sattelzeit*, a threshold period of transition between early modern and modern Germany, roughly stretching from 1750 to 1850, as the threshold period of transition.] See *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*. Eds. H. Lehmann, M. Richter. Washington, D. C.: German Historical Institute, 1996.

² Exhibitions: Adolph Menzel (1815–1905): Between Romanticism and Impressionism – Musée d’Orsay, Paris, April 15 – July 28, 1996; Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, February 7 – May 11, 1997; National Gallery of Art, Washington, September 15, 1996 – January 5, 1997. Catalog: *Adolph Menzel, 1815–1905: Between Romanticism and Impressionism*. Eds. C. Keisch, M. U. Riemann-Reyher. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Menzel's interest in historical subjects was largely limited to the first twenty-five years of his long artistic career. He died in 1905, at the considerable age of ninety, highly respected and yet very one-sidedly understood. The beginning of his career was shaped by his deep fascination with the history of eighteenth-century Prussia, and more precisely with the life of Frederick II, better known as Frederick the Great. Indeed, Menzel's breakthrough came with a series of illustrations for the 1840 book *History of Frederick the Great*, by Franz Kugler³. (Fig. 2) Menzel's distinctive realism was already fully formed at the time, resulting in what Kugler describes as the "daguerreotype-like reality" of his renderings. In the years to come, Menzel would carry on with this subject but on a grander scale: in the late 1840s and 1850s he produced a series of oil paintings of varying size and importance, which took up the themes previously visualized in the Kugler illustrations. Then, in the late 1850s, he quite abruptly ended his involvement with history painting altogether in order to study observed reality. Many scholars have interpreted this sudden change as the moment when Menzel finally managed to catch up with the international avant-garde and, to some extent, this is correct. But it is important not to misconstrue this development simply as a linear progression from tradition to modernity, for already the seemingly "traditional" was deeply affected by the spirit of modernity.

The reading of Menzel's history painting as modern contradicts two historically very influential patterns in the Menzel historiography; while opposed to each other, they both distorted his achievement: on the one side were his admirers, who celebrated Menzel again later in life as *the* painter of Frederick the Great, without considering him to be a "peintre de la vie moderne". The heroic figure of the king was the focus of this interpretative strand: Frederick the Great as the founder of the great Prussian State who incarnated in an impressive way specifically Protestant-German values, such as duty, dedication and the preparedness for battle, a king who took an important step in building the power-conscious German Empire.⁴

No less influential than this conservative approach was the modernist interpretation of the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe, who at the beginning of the twentieth century privileged Menzel's landscape sketches and city views. Seeing in these a proto-Impressionist handling of colour and motif, Meier-Graefe set them against Menzel's history paintings, accepting only the former as artistically valuable.⁵

³ F. Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*. Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1840; A. Menzel, *Die Armee Friedrichs des Großen in ihrer Uniformierung gezeichnet und erläutert von Adolph Menzel*. Berlin, 1851–1857; A. Menzel, *Illustrationen zu den Werken Friedrichs des Grossen*. In Holz geschnitten von O. Vogel, A. Vogel, F. Unzelmann und H. Müller. 200 fols with text by Ludwig Pietsch, 4 vols. Berlin, 1882.

⁴ On this dominant kind of reception, see Michaela Diener, "Ein Fürst der Kunst ist uns gestorben": Gedanken zum Nachruhm Adolph von Menzels in den Jahren 1905–1910", *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 21, 1999 Beiheft, pp. 313–324.

⁵ J. Meier-Graefe, *Der junge Menzel: Ein Problem der Kunstökonomie Deutschlands*. Munich: R. Piper, 1914. My interpretation draws on Werner Hofmann; see the passages on Menzel's *Hochkirch* picture in: id., *Das irdische Paradies*. Munich: Prestel, 1960, p. 119.

II

During the nineteenth century, artists, art historians and critics all intensely theorized on the status of history painting. This is reminiscent of the French situation, where, for example, Paul Delaroche (1797–1856) provoked an intense discussion with his stage-like representations of dramatic episodes from the history of Western Europe, a discussion that also had a strong influence on Germany⁶. (Fig. 3) The kind of historical pictures produced by Delaroche sprang from a practice formed even before the turn of the century, which was consequently subsumed under the term “troubadour-painting”. With its evocations of ages past, this particular branch of historical imagination was mostly interested in the private aspects of “great” men’s lives; during the course of the later nineteenth century, this led to an art which, as “genre historique”, combined characteristics of genre painting with those of history painting.⁷

In German, the development of a new nomenclature benefited from the fact that the German language has not only one, but two terms for “history”: 1) the term “Historie”, derived from the Latin *historia*, and 2) the Germanic “Geschichte”, stemming from the German “Geschehen”. Generally speaking, reflections on the nature of history painting – here understood in the widest sense of the term – focused on the question of its idealist versus its realist character, whereby the term “*Historienmalerei*” became associated with the idealist approach, and the term “*Geschichtsmalerei*” with the realist attitude.⁸

My argument is intended to reveal the deep affinities of Menzel’s art with the concept of *Geschichtsmalerei*, which he imbued with the most subtle psychological dimensions of meaning, a subtlety rarely achieved in this genre and which *Historienmalerei*, with its focus on the universal rather than the individual, was basically unwilling to reach. In his pursuit of psychological refinement, Menzel deconstructed inherited models of the iconography of rulers by humanizing the king, reducing the hierarchic character of the pictorial field, and radically altering the temporal structure of his images. Before addressing this crucial point, I should comment on the “revolution of history painting”, recognized more than half a century ago by Edgar Wind in the context of the (English) history painting of the Enlightenment.⁹

⁶ S. Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997.

⁷ See T. W. Gaetgens, “Menzel et la peinture française de son temps: deux conceptions du genre historique,” *Menzel (1815–1905): “la névrose du vrai”*. Ed. C. Keisch. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux [...], 1996, pp. 113–124.

⁸ On the French situation, see the recent contribution by P. Duro, “Giving up on History? Challenges to the Hierarchy of the Genres in Early Nineteenth Century France,” *Art History*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2005, pp. 689–711.

⁹ E. Wind, “The Revolution of History Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 2, 1938–1939, pp. 116–127.

The Eighteenth-Century Prelude to Modern *Geschichtsmalerei*

Such painters and engravers as Johann Heinrich Tischbein (1722–1789), Bernhard Rode (1725–1797) and Daniel Chodowiecki (1726–1801) began to render more recent historical events in an innovative fashion. No longer merely interested in antiquity and the Scriptures, these artists began to choose topics from a past closer to their own present, in particular when this past had bearings on the question of contemporary national identity: they also looked at episodes from medieval and early modern history, both German and European. In representing these events the artists tried to create an authentic atmosphere of time and place, to reconstruct a historically accurate environment – at least as accurate as the existing antiquarian knowledge (which flourished during the late eighteenth century) and their own studies permitted.¹⁰ We should beware, though, of seeing the phenomenon of a “revolution of history painting” as a linear development, at least in the German context. Romanticism and its Nazarene offspring certainly took up some of the impulses, not least with their appreciation of medieval themes. But Romanticism adhered to an idealist notion of art, as opposed to the realist tendencies of artists of the Enlightenment, such as Chodowiecki and Rode.

III

Peter Cornelius (1784–1867) may be seen as the artist who embodied the idealist notion of art most purely, and he is therefore the crucial starting point for any further discussion. Cornelius fashioned a programme of reviving fresco painting in Germany, and it was this programme of a national public art that fostered his exemplary career: called to Munich by the Bavarian Crown Prince, the future Ludwig I, to attend to the pictorial decoration of various recently founded important museums, at the beginning of the 1840s he moved to Berlin, where the Prussian King provided him with commissions¹¹. (Fig. 4) With the conciseness characteristic of a painter of large fresco cycles, Cornelius referred to the new *Geschichtsmalerei*, realist in inspiration, as “invocations of ghosts”, thus minimising the attempt to create historically correct reconstructions in pictures with historical subjects.¹² In so doing, he was not entirely wrong, because what I refer to as *Geschichtsmalerei* has, according to Stephen Bann’s striking analysis in his book *The Clothing of Clio*, something of the quality of the resurrection of the dead; it moves the depicted figures so close to the

¹⁰ F. Büttner, “Wilhelm Tischbeins ‘Konradin von Schwaben,’” *Kunstsplitter: Beiträge zur nordeuropäischen Kunstgeschichte*. Festschrift für Wolfgang J. Müller zum 70. Geburtstag überreicht von Kollegen und Schülern. Husum: Husum, 1984, pp. 100–117. For the general context, see R. Strong, *And When Did You Last See Your Father? The Victorian Painter and British History*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.

¹¹ See F. Büttner, “The Frescoes of Peter Cornelius in the Munich Ludwigskirche and Contemporary Criticism,” *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*. Ed. A. Hemingway. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 229–251. See also C. Grewe, “Historicism and the Symbolic Imagination in Nazarene Art,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 89, no. 1, March 2007, pp. 82–107.

¹² See M. Carrière, “Peter Cornelius,” *Der neue Plutarch: Biographien hervorragender Charaktere der Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst*. Ed. R. Gottschall, pt. 7. Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1880, p. 327.

beholder that they – as would later be the case in film – appear to share his life.¹³ As an alternative to this “invocation of ghosts”, Cornelius and his followers propagated the artistic realization of an idea within which there always appears more than the specific moment and the specific individual. In mostly choosing mythical and biblical subjects they insisted on the realization in the work of art of historical principles, trans-temporal notions and trans-individual norms. What once happened is never merely a simple fact. An invocation of a lived past has its own necessity, and it is the result of a logic which integrates it into a meaningful structure. Incidentally, this logic for Cornelius was determined by God.

How then can the artist proceed? He needs to transcend the simple moment and visualize only what “contains within itself and makes visible an entire series of events [...]”.¹⁴ The “event for and in itself”, as Cornelius remarked derogatorily when confronted with pictures by Paul Delaroche, was shaped by “trifles” and thus had to seem dispensable to anybody who posed the question of what superior truth was to be represented by the event.¹⁵ What was crucial was that in its pure factuality the past was not deemed worthy to reappear in the image. Only when it had a universal meaning did it deserve to engage the fantasy of the artist.

Searching for the “Characteristic”

Anton Springer, known to this day as one of the founders of modern art history, defended the opposite view. Sceptical vis-à-vis the idealists’ concern with the spirit of the past, with the “beyond of history”, Springer himself preferred a representation of “individual conditions” and “single moments rich in interrelations”.¹⁶ His notion was determined by material density, and that of his idealist opponents by spiritual depth. Although a certain fundamental scepticism existed on the German side with regard to the realist model of the French, the 1840s witnessed an increasing appreciation of the concern for reality embedded in the French approach. German critics now suggested to the artists “not to paint anything that is not the possible object of vision, that cannot be factual”.¹⁷ In the context of this convoluted process, art theoretical terms were significantly redefined, such as the notion of the “characteristic”.

Since the characteristic was seen as the result of intense observation, idealist-neo-classical theory had rejected it in favour of the “ideal”.¹⁸ The artist seeking to represent the

¹³ S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 14 ff.

¹⁴ J. M. Söhl, *Die bildende Kunst in München*. Munich, 1842, p. 81.

¹⁵ See *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*. New Series 3, 1858, p. 797.

¹⁶ A. Springer, “Die bildenden Künste in der Gegenwart,” *Die Gegenwart, eine encyclopädische Darstellung der neuesten Zeitgeschichte für alle Stände*, vol. 12. Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1856, p. 717.

¹⁷ W. Herold, *Über die Stellung der bildenden Kunst in der Gegenwart: Ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte*. Halle, 1855, p. 64.

¹⁸ See E. Krückeberg, “Das Charakteristische,” *Historisches Wörterbuch für Philosophie*. Ed. J. Ritter, K. Gründer, vol. 1. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, cols. 992–994.

characteristic – in the felicitous phrase of the art historian Friedrich Wilhelm Ungers – listens to “nature in its most hidden traits and most transient appearances”.¹⁹ Rather than using nature, as does the idealist, as a starting point of a mental construction aimed at transcending nature itself, the realist artist makes nature the focus of extreme attention. Under such conditions, how is it possible to produce paintings dedicated to historical themes? One reply, and not an inappropriate one, would be that such painting did indeed develop symptoms of crisis in the middle of the nineteenth century, at least from the vantage point of the avant-garde. But in Menzel we find an example of the attempt to combine historical themes with a mode of representation oriented toward the characteristic. Menzel thus represented a quest, cogently described by Ernst Guhl in his 1848 study *Die neuere geschichtliche Malerei*, for a fullness of reality that preferred recent events to those of the distant past. Guhl stressed that Menzel’s themes were inaccessible to traditional history painting, which preferred “symbolic forms of indication”.²⁰

Menzel Painting Frederick the Great

The turn to representing the recent past was bound to encounter the scepticism of those advocating classical history painting. This was the case with regard to Menzel. After all, when he chose to paint the great events from the life of Frederick the Great, these dated back less than a century: in the eyes of any idealist, a negligible chronological distance. Typical of the idealist position was the attitude of the Romantic landscape painter Christian Köster (1784–1851), active in Heidelberg. Wrapped up in reveries of *Gedankenkunst* filled with longing, the painter stated: “Fantasy is limited by the present; it leads to prose and sobriety. The past liberates fantasy.”²¹ Köster left no doubt that the liberating potential of the past seemed even greater to him the further back that past dated.

Great chronological distance and the scent of myth: both can be viewed as qualities that enabled a transformation of the particular individual into the universal hero. Accordingly, the Dresden collector Johann Gottlob von Quandt (1787–1859), who had greatly contributed to the rediscovery of “old German” (i.e. medieval and Renaissance) art, proposed the “ideal of the great man” against the “specificity of the person”, considering only the former as worthy of pursuit.²² The German poet, critic and literary historian Wolfgang Menzel (1798–1873) critically appealed to the Belgian *Geschichtsmaler* (painters of modern realist history), whose depictions of Belgian history achieved spectacular successes in the 1840s: “When you paint a hero who is meant to enchant us, he ceases to be the particular

¹⁹ F. W. Unger, *Die bildende Kunst. Ästhetische Betrachtungen über Architektur, Skulptur und Malerei für Künstler und Kunstfreunde*. Göttingen, 1858, p. 127.

²⁰ E. Guhl, *Die neuere geschichtliche Malerei und die Akademien*. Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1848.

²¹ *Gedankenkunst* can be translated as ideational art, art of ideas and thought or art of the mind. Chr. Köster, *Zerstreute Gedanken-Blätter über Kunst*, fasc. 1–6. Mannheim, 1833–1848, see fasc. 6 (1848), p. 26.

²² See J. G. von Quandt, “Der Parallelismus zwischen ausübender Kunst und deren Literatur,” *Allgemeine Monatsschrift für Literatur* 1, 1850, p. 61f.

historical hero and turns into some general ideal."²³ In opposition to Quandt and Wolfgang Menzel, the representations of Frederick by Adolf Menzel were as specific as possible. They were not imaginable without being placed in a concrete historical environment, and their appeal to a significant extent derives from their evocative settings.

The production of meaning becomes problematic under these circumstances: at least it differs structurally from the procedure prescribed by idealist premises. Here again Springer found an explanation worth considering. When an artist such as Adolph Menzel strove for greater (historical) reality, when he "entirely delves [...] into external action", that is to say when he no longer derived his construction from a pre-existent idea, then it became impossible "to search for meaning and the idea *behind* the external appearances"; instead, meaning was located precisely in the external appearances.²⁴ Meaning began to oscillate freely and to constitute itself only in collaboration with the beholder, who had to participate in constituting it, a fact whose importance for modern art cannot be overestimated. Such a procedure precludes the possibility of viewing these images as simple statements of a Prussian world-view, as frequently happened in the reception of Menzel during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Adolf Menzel's Images of Frederick the Great

Very soon after the revolution of 1848, Menzel the Great began to concentrate with greater intensity on developing designs for oil painting that would have Frederick the Great as their subject. Indeed, one may say that the initial ideas for most of them go back to late 1848 and 1849. Here, I will not focus on what have become true icons in the German commemoration of Frederick, namely Menzel's *Dinner party of Frederick the Great* and the *Flute concert*. (Fig. 5) Instead, I will briefly examine *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch*, most probably lost in the last war, although there are other works that seem still to be housed in some virtually unknown Russian museums. (Fig. 6)

The likely destruction of Menzel's picture *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch*, painted between 1850 and 1856, is in my opinion one of the greatest art losses of World War Two, when it comes to nineteenth-century painting.²⁵ The – original – title is indicative and almost touching, if a little naïve. The picture is not devoted to the celebration of the king, at least not exclusively. It equally emphasizes the king's comrades-in-arms, who by extension almost become members of his family. The choice of this battle as the picture's theme is typical of Menzel's unorthodox attitude, as the battle ended in one of the most noteworthy, albeit not lastingly damaging, defeats of the Prussians during the Seven Years War.

²³ See W. Menzel, Rezension zu E. Guhl, "Die neuere geschichtliche Malerei," *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser: Literaturblatt* 19, 1848, p. 279.

²⁴ See Springer "Die bildenden Künste in der Gegenwart," p. 737, n. 19.

²⁵ Adolph Menzel. *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch*, 13./14. October 1758. Oil on canvas, 295 × 378 cm. 1850–1856 (once Berlin, Nationalgalerie).

The battle occurred on 14 October 1758, when the Austrian field marshal Daun launched, at five in the morning, a surprise attack against the Prussians, which was largely successful.

The title *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch* is also significant in that it points to an aspect of the representation most unusual for the genre of battle scenes: we do not see both of the adversary parties as they are engaged in battle, but only one of them, the Prussians. Frederick approaches on a galloping horse from the back, whilst on the right a group of officers behind him watches him, their faces filled with concern and dismay, as their king is exposing himself to the enemy's hostile fire. The foreground is filled with soldiers trying to climb up a slope from the lower right. The Austrians do not appear, and are only alluded to as the targets of the Prussian firing platoons positioned left of centre, which desperately try to beat back the enemy offensive. Menzel's decision to focus only on one half of the battling forces was highly unconventional, and indeed decidedly non-classical. A passage from the widely read book *Grundlagen zu der Lehre von den verschiedenen Gattungen der Malerei*, by Adam Weise, illustrates this point: "In battle equal force is distributed; boldness of attack and courageous resistance are visible, and the more the attack rages furiously here, and the fighters distinguish themselves by their expressions and postures, the more the action gains in truth."²⁶ Here, quite literally, "classical" means "balanced", and only the state of equilibrium grants truth to the action depicted. Thereby, the combination of several moments is crucial, as it guarantees a transcendence of the singular and therefore necessarily incomplete moment. "In the representation of the immeasurable tumult of battle [the painter must] not give only one moment, but must give a survey of the whole in the combination of several moments; he can describe the various, often strongly contrasting passions and characters, here depict courage in a lively manner, there fear, fury and terror, triumph and despair, and can achieve a wonderful effect."²⁷ This view, propagated by Ignatius Jeitteles in his *Ästhetisches Lexikon*, ultimately reached back as far as Leon Battista Alberti and his notion of variety. Alberti's founding text of modern history painting had defined the necessity of depicting an event in such a way that it appeared comprehensive. Only when it was comprehensive could it overcome mere factuality and lay claim to the ideal. Even in Menzel's day, this model was widely observed, at least by those who felt allegiance with *Historien* – rather than with *Geschichtsmalerei*. Wilhelm Kaulbach's *Battle of the Huns*, of 1834–1837, is a good example. I even consider it possible that Menzel's motif of soldiers desperately staggering up a slope was a satire of Kaulbach's vision of dead soldiers who ascended to heaven, where they continued to fight.

The *Hochkirch* picture was not comprehensive in one further respect: it emphasized the moment in such an exaggerated manner that Karl Frenzel, a liberal with a national orientation who wrote for the journal *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, maintained that

²⁶ A. Weise, *Grundlagen zu der Lehre von den verschiedenen Gattungen der Malerei*. Halle/Leipzig, 1823, p. 121.

²⁷ I. Jeitteles, *Aesthetisches Lexikon. Ein alphabetisches Handbuch zur Theorie der Philosophie des Schönen und der schönen Künste*, 2 vols. Vienna, 1836/37, entry 'Bataillenmalerei'.

Menzel paid attention "only to reality, to the moment".²⁸ And he significantly added: "In no feature does *The Attack at Hochkirch* indicate any more than that; neither the importance of the battle for the King, nor the fatal over-confidence in victory which led to it. No more than just an attack."²⁹ Frenzel rightfully observed that the work hinted neither at previous nor at subsequent events so as to give meaning to the battle; the effect of the picture derives from pure presence, like a snapshot taken in the dark with a flash, and precisely this gives it the picture its intensity. When exhibited in Düsseldorf in 1858, *Hochkirch* provoked a decisive rejection that deserves to be quoted in full, given the degree to which it clarifies matters: "Admittedly, it is possible that this event really presented a scene such as the one depicted by the artist, but that is not the issue. Art has its own laws, and the artist can come close to poetic truth only to the extent that he violates factual truth. Therein lies the difference between prose and poetry, realism and idealism, and because [Menzel] neglected this difference the intended *Geschichtsmalerei* of this famous artist turned into a genre picture."³⁰ This criticism demonstrates to an impressive extent the correlation between fullness of reality and belonging to a genre. It insists on the decisive difference of imitation as *imitatio naturae* and what can only be called a simulation of nature resulting from the artist's self-understanding as eyewitness.

Ocular testimony must be understood entirely literally here, although this is impossible in a historical event. A *Geschichtsmaler* like Menzel comprehended himself as *present* in front of the event, observing it as if it were happening in real life. He thus differed from the *Historienmaler*, who *imagines* this event. Menzel would have been expected to view Frederick in the battle of Hochkirch with the eyes of the mind, at least if he had followed the prescriptions given by conservative art criticism. Two aspects of his painting, however, demonstrate most succinctly Menzel's rejection of these prescriptions. Firstly, he painted the Prussian King with reduced sovereignty; secondly (and inseparable from the former), he represented him too small. A contemporary description of Menzel's picture as "a true photograph from the time of the Great King" provides a helpful clue to interpret Menzel's unconventional composition, since the image indeed appears to incorporate characteristics of photography into the medium of painting.³¹

That the king dominates the painting at first glance, but seems upon further reflection to be scarcely able to assert himself against the figures in the foreground is confirmed by contemporary descriptions of the image. In 1856, for example, the *Frankfurter Museum* wrote: "Additionally, the centre of the image in terms of conception and placing, that is, Frederick himself, is so far distant that he appears secondary, whereas the foreground is filled with numerous life-size figures."³² The spatial qualification – and this is the moral

²⁸ See *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd* 4, 1859, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See *Deutsches Kunstblatt* 9, 1858, p. 55.

³¹ *Die Zeit*, 26 September 1856.

³² D. R., "Ein Gang durch die akademische Kunstaussstellung zu Berlin," II, *Frankfurter Museum* 2, 1856, p. 404.

background of the accusation – leads to a factual deprivation of power, a fact that is fundamentally opposed to the focus on the hero advocated by *Historienmalerei*. It is thus not surprising that critics fervently attacked the lack of superiority in the figure of Frederick. One surmised that “the appearance of the King is perhaps not sufficiently powerful”, while another saw in him a “pale ghost”.³³ That the suddenness and shock of the attack appear in the face of almost every Prussian soldier might be permissible, but that they “speak out of the [face] even of Frederick all too clearly” was, in Frenzel’s opinion, unacceptable.³⁴ It limited the fundamental freedom of the classical hero, who had become the victim of the progress of the action.

Indeed, the figures in the foreground absorb a good part of the beholder’s interest, and in their existential involvement engage it lastingly. Each soldier is portrayed in his suffering individuality. Appropriately, the French critic Paul Mantz defined the *Battle of Hochkirch*, when he reviewed it in 1867 for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, not only as a battle scene, but also, and this is the interesting point, as a “réunion de portraits”.³⁵ This second definition leads to the painting’s paratactic composition, which does not conform with the spirit of history painting, a fact subtly noted by the critic Andreas Oppermann – the brother-in-law of the famous Dresden sculptor Ernst Rietschel – who favoured a very moderate realism: “Undoubtedly, in a manner of speaking, he captured nature on his canvas, but the artist is squashed by the striking details, all of which come to the fore with the same force; he loses the expression of what he wants to say overall, and the viewer is upset by the hotch-potch of the astounding.”³⁶ The “unified total impression” is lost, the whole divided into its parts. Even with the best of intentions, Julius Große complained, one cannot arrive at a clear impression of the event.³⁷ For the conservatives, this was abhorrent. The one-sided emphasis on the characteristic at the cost of beauty and historical grandeur confused them, because it challenged one of the fundamental notions of their understanding of art. Instead, the discordant – a characteristic of the uncertainty of modern existence – pushed itself into the foreground.

The starting point of my analysis was the distinction between *Historienmalerei* and *Geschichtsmalerei*. The former reflects the classical idealist model powerfully present in nineteenth-century art practice and theory as embodied by Peter Cornelius. *Geschichtsmalerei* embraced new approaches, here referred to as realist, which privileged observation over construction.

³³ *Düsseldorfer Zeitung*, 3 November 1857 (‘Kunstnotiz’); anonymous, “Die deutsche Geschichtsmalerei,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 2, 1859, p. 348.

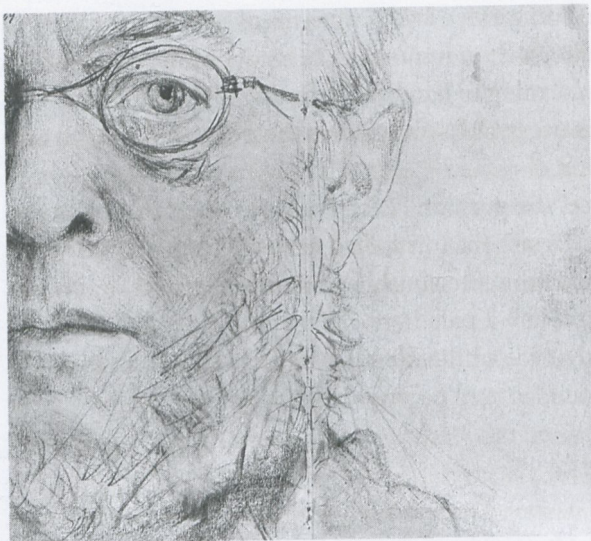
³⁴ *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, New Series 4, 1859, p. 22.

³⁵ The review appeared on the occasion of the painting’s presentation in the Prussian pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair. P. Mantz, “Adolphe Menzel. Le Grand Frédéric à Hochkirch,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 23/1, 1867, p. 140.

³⁶ A. Oppermann, “Nach der historischen Kunstaussstellung,” *Anregungen für Kunst, Leben und Wissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1859), p. 67.

³⁷ *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd* 4, 1859, p. 22.

The results of this shift can be observed on various levels: in terms of temporal structure a new emphasis on the moment emerged, which prevented the beholder from comprehending the represented scene as part of a meaningful continuum through and over time. The narrative becomes precarious, and this necessarily strengthens the position of the viewer, who has to contribute to the production of meaning. A similar observation is true for the devaluation of the hero's predominance: the position of the hero was questioned, even to the degree of a true dis-empowerment. Details that distracted from the centre of the image were pushed into the foreground, so that what previously had merely played a supportive role now became a carrier of meaning. Such a paradigm change may be called modern, because the work of art is understood as the unflinching result of unbiased observation rather than the visualization of a mental idea, and because it offers meaning to the viewer rather than merely passing the visualization on.



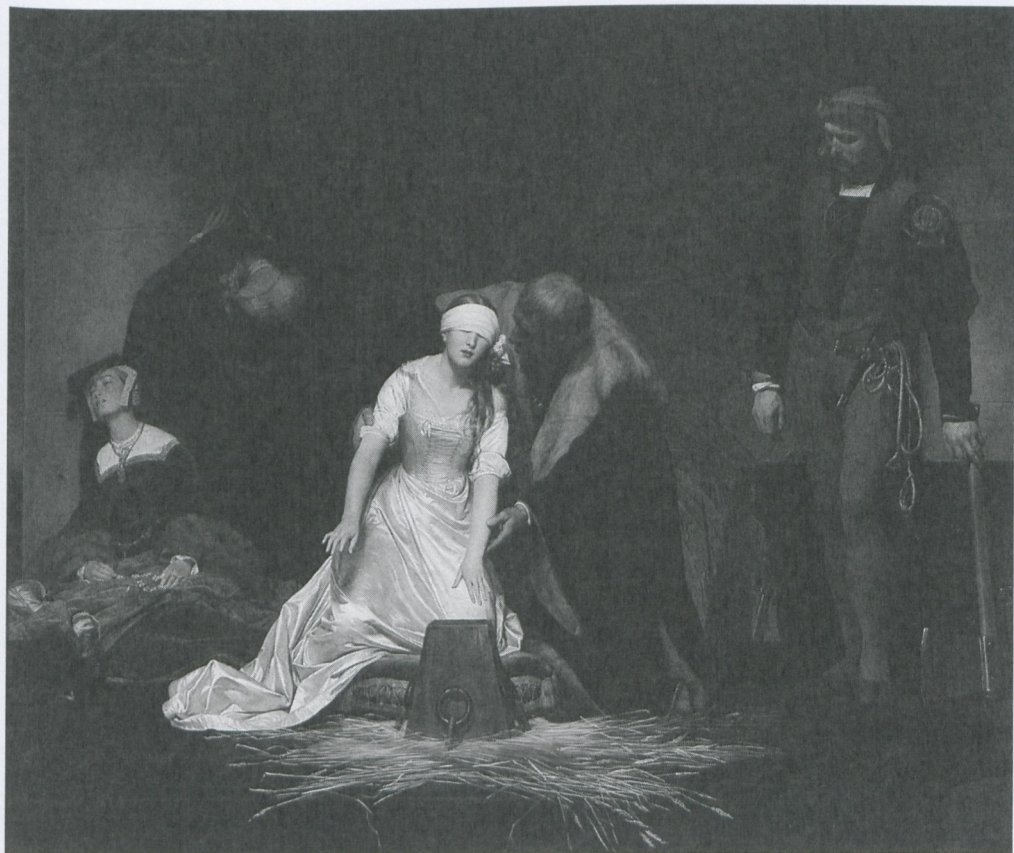
1. Adolph Menzel
 Autoportree ühe silmaga
 1876. Pliats
 Repro: M. Fried, Menzel's Realism
 Art and Embodiment in the Nineteenth
 Century. New Haven & London, 2002

Adolph Menzel
 Partial Self-Portrait
 1876. Pencil
 Repro: M. Fried, Menzel's Realism
 Art and Embodiment in the Nineteenth
 Century. New Haven & London, 2002



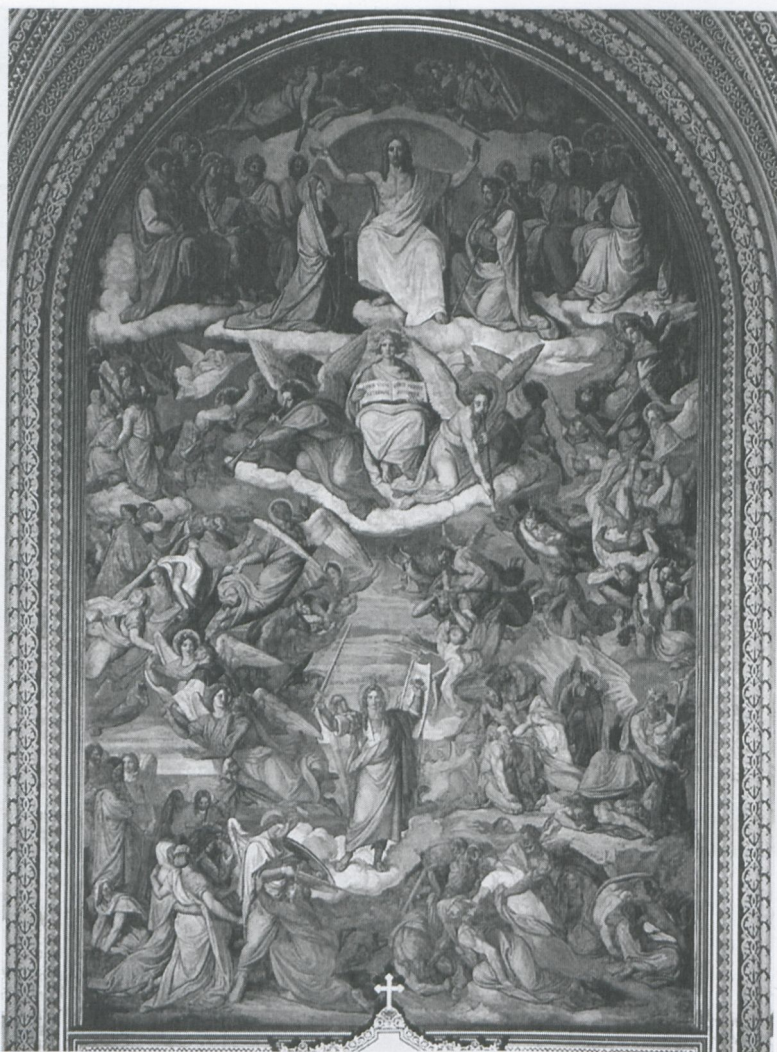
2. Adolph Menzel
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 Friedrichs des Großen
 Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1840

Adolph Menzel
 Title Page: F Kugler, Geschichte Friedrichs
 des Großen
 Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1840



3. Paul Delaroche
Leedi Jane Grey hukkamine
1833. Õli
Allikas: Wikipedia

Paul Delaroche
The Execution of Lady Jane Grey
1833. Oil
Source: Wikipedia



4. Peter Cornelius
Viimne kohtupäev
1836–1839. Fresko
Püha Ludwigi kirik, München

Peter Cornelius
The Last Judgement
1836–1839. Fresco
St. Ludwig Church, Munich



5. Adolph Menzel
Flötenkonzert
1850–1852. Öli
Allikas: Wikipedia

Adolph Menzel
Flute Concert
1850–1852. Oil
Source: Wikipedia



6. Adolph Menzel
 Friedrich ja tema lähedased Hochkirchi all
 1850–1856. Õli
 Repro: M. Fried, *Menzel's Realism. Art and
 Embodiment in the Nineteenth Century*
 New Haven & London, 2002

Adolph Menzel
Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch
 1850–1856. Oil
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