

## THE MODERNITY OF HISTORY PAINTING: THE CASE OF ADOLPH MENZEL

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In the context of the rise of modernism in the nineteenth century, history painting has consistently been denounced as backward and old-fashioned; '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 times. This second aspect in particular was essential for the negative reputation that history painting began to acquire rapidly in the decades after the Congress in Vienna in 1815: 'Il faut être absolument moderne', that famous phrase of Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) that leading exponents of the modern period had prefigured in many variations and 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 much more complicated than that. Even such an apparently conservative phenomenon as history painting, as I argue in this article, contained modern elements; indeed, it ultimately seems 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.<sup>1</sup>

The intention of describing history painting as a phenomenon of the modern period might appear peculiar, and my desire to shift the geographical focus could be seen as equally odd – although perhaps not as odd as it would have been thirty years ago, but odd nonetheless. The avant-garde has always been construed as a thoroughly French phenomenon, and this is true to this day. The great heroes of the avant-garde are the French. Only the last two decades have witnessed attempts to differentiate and widen our perception of Europe's artistic landscape to a greater extent. While the German contribution had certainly found acceptance as important in the area of Romanticism, subsequent developments in German art tended to be viewed as predominantly provincial by comparison. The present article challenges these positions, although the aim is not – and cannot be – simply to rate the German contribution more highly, in particular since the author himself is German. Nor can the goal be merely to add two or three German names to the list of avant-garde painters. Instead, by studying more closely artistic discussions and practices in Berlin during the post-Romantic period, I demonstrate that they, too, addressed important problems of artistic

<sup>1</sup> R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); trans. R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). [Editor's note: In Koselleck's explanatory system, this openness toward 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 between 1750 and 1850 as threshold period of transition. See H. Lehmann and M. Richter (eds.), *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1996); also accessible online: [http://www.ghi-dc.org/publications\\_occasional.html](http://www.ghi-dc.org/publications_occasional.html).]

modernization and ultimately worked through those aspects central to the phenomenon of history's temporalization and thus key to the modern period per se. The painter at the centre of my argument is Adolph Menzel (1815–1905), an artist who has attracted increased attention also in the English-speaking world since the exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. ten years ago and the 2002 publication by Michael Fried.<sup>2</sup>

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 not fully 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 an 1840 book on the *History of Frederick the Great* by Franz Kugler (1808–1858), and the artist subsequently continued working in this field with yet another large cycle of woodcuts depicting Frederick's deeds.<sup>3</sup> Menzel's distinctive realism was already fully formed at this moment resulting in what Kugler describes as the 'daguerreotype-like reality' of his renderings; a striking example for this proto-photographic sense of is a scene in the chapter 'Frederick's reign up to the Seven Years War' from the *History of Frederick the Great*. As if in passing we glance into a chamber where we get a quick glimpse of the young Frederick working at his desk (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> In the years to come Menzel would carry on with this subject but on a grander scale: In the 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. (I will discuss a selection of these canvases in the second part of this article.) Then, in the late 1850s, he quite abruptly concluded his engagement 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 certainly 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 turns against two historically very influential patterns in the Menzel historiography, which, while opposed to each other, 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 as a 'peintre de la vie moderne' as well. 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 had constituted an important step towards the power-conscious German Empire. Even today, this reading is still shaping the popular understanding of Menzel and his Frederick paintings.<sup>5</sup> No less influential than this conservative approach was the modernist interpretation of art historian Julius Meier-Graefe (1867–1935), 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

<sup>2</sup> Some of the arguments presented here are taken from my book *Adolph Menzels Friedrich-Bilder: Theorie und Praxis der Geschichtsmalerei im Berlin der 1850er Jahre* (Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2001). See also C. Keisch and M.-U. Riemann-Reyher (eds.), *Adolph Menzel, 1815–1905: Between Romanticism and Impressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with National Gallery of Art Washington, 1996) and M. Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> F. Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen* (Leipzig, 1840); A. Menzel, *Die Armee Friedrichs des Großen in ihrer Uniformierung gezeichnet und erläutert von Adolph Menzel* (Berlin, 1851–57); A. Menzel, *Illustrationen zu den Werken Friedrichs des Grossen. In Holz geschnitten von O. Vogel, A. Vogel, Fr. Unzelmann und H. Müller*, 200 folios with text by Ludwig Pietsch, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1882).

<sup>4</sup> Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*, 260. The 'daguerrotypartige Realität' in *Kunstblatt* (1848), 177. See F. Forster-Hahn, 'Adolph Menzel's "Daguerrotypical" Image of Frederick the Great: A Liberal Bourgeois Interpretation of German History', *Art Bulletin*, 59:2 (1977), 242–61.

<sup>5</sup> On this dominant kind of reception see M. 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), 313–24.



Fig. 1 Adolph Menzel, *Frederick the Great Working at his Desk*, 1840, woodcut, 10.6 × 7.9 cm, from: Franz Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen* (Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1840), 260

artistically valuable.<sup>6</sup> One can see Michael Fried as an heir to this tradition, even if his important and astute readings of Menzel have shifted the focus from the ingenious pictorial execution highlighted by Meier-Graefe to the idea of an ‘embodied painting’. A persistent theme of Fried’s scholarship, this notion of embodied painting suggests that we see Menzel’s images not as realizations of an abstract vision, but as materializations of his concrete visual perception that result from, and mirror, an artistic–physical process. In any event, history painting barely figures at all in Fried’s account.

#### HISTORY PAINTING VERSUS THE PAINTING OF HISTORY

During the nineteenth century, artists, art historians and critics alike intensely theorized the status of history painting – not exclusively, but certainly with particular emphasis on Germany. One may be

<sup>6</sup> J. Meier-Graefe, *Der junge Menzel: Ein Problem der Kunstökonomie Deutschlands* (Munich: R. Piper, 1914). My interpretation draws on the work of Werner Hofmann: see the passages on Menzel’s *Hochkirch* picture in W. Hofmann, *Das irdische Paradies: Motive und Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Prestel, 1960), 119.

reminded 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 Germany.<sup>7</sup> The kind of historical pictures produced by Delaroche sprang from a practice formed even before the turn of the century and consequently subsumed under the term 'troubadour-painting'. 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 it led to an art which, as 'genre historique', combined characteristics of genre painting with those of history painting.<sup>8</sup>

In France the differentiation of history painting led to the establishment of a specific terminology for this new pictorial type: the 'genre historique'. The term indicated that this new type combined two traditional genres that were previously strictly separated within the hierarchy of genres, and from now on the 'genre historique' was distinct from 'peinture d'histoire'. In German, the development of a new nomenclature benefited from the fact that the German language knows not just one, but two terms for 'history': first, the term 'Historie' derived from the Latin *historia*; second, the Germanic 'Geschichte' stemming from the German 'Geschehen' [event(s), happening(s)]. 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, the term 'Geschichtsmalerei' with a realist attitude.<sup>9</sup>

My argument is intended to reveal the deep affinities of Menzel's art with the concept of *Geschichtsmalerei*, which he imbued with 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 incapable of reaching. In his pursuit of psychological refinement, Menzel deconstructed inherited models of the iconography of rulers by humanizing the King, reducing the hierarchical 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 for (English) history painting of the Enlightenment. Ultimately, it was this revolution that initiated the conceptual division of *Historien-* and *Geschichtsmalerei* and probably caused the latter's predominance.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PRELUDE TO MODERN GESCHICHTSMALEREI

It is rewarding to cast a quick glance back into the eighteenth century. Painters and engravers such as Johann Heinrich Tischbein (1751–1829), Bernhard Rode (1725–1797) and Daniel Chodowiecki (1726–1801) began to render more recent historical events in an innovatory 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 now looked also at episodes from medieval and early modern history both German and European. In representing these events – and this is the innovatory aspect of their practice – the artists tried to create an authentic atmosphere of time and place, that is, 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.<sup>11</sup> This striving for accurate reconstructions

<sup>7</sup> S. Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See T. W. Gachtgens, 'Menzel et la peinture française de son temps: deux conceptions du genre historique', in *Menzel (1815–1905): "la névrose du vrai"*, edited by C. Keisch (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), 113–24.

<sup>9</sup> On the French situation see the recent contribution by Paul Duro, 'Giving up on History? Challenges to the Hierarchy of the Genres in Early Nineteenth Century France', *Art History*, 28:5 (2005), 689–711.

<sup>10</sup> E. Wind, 'The Revolution of History Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 2 (1938), 116–27.

<sup>11</sup> F. Büttner, 'Wilhelm Tischbeins "Konradin von Schwaben"', in *Kunstsplitter: Beiträge zur nordeuropäischen Kunstgeschichte: Festschrift für Wolfgang J. Müller zum 70. Geburtstag überreicht von Kollegen und Schülern* (Husum: Husum Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft, 1984), 100–19. 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).

aimed not only to capture the complexity of the historical developments described, but also to catch a glimpse of the great past of the German Empire of which, by the eighteenth century, only little remained and which a nationalism informed by the Enlightenment hoped to reconstitute.

Often, the artists approached this conquest of new historical moments and unexplored periods with a certain hesitation and insecurity – a sign of its novelty. A case in point is Tischbein's 1784 canvas *Konradin of Swabia and Frederick of Austria in Prison* (Fig. 2), which, as Frank Büttner has pointed out, meets the demands of historical exactitude only half-heartedly. Already a closer look at the central figure is sufficient to illustrate the artist's ambivalence, which he dressed in a vaguely classicizing manner, but certainly not a medieval one. In any event, the clothing of the central figure forms an obvious contrast to the appearance of the story's two unfortunate heroes on the left, a contrast that undermines the homogeneity of the image.

In addition, we should beware of seeing the phenomenon of a 'revolution of history painting' as the cause of a linear development, at least in the German context. Romanticism and its Nazarene offspring certainly took up some of the impulses, not least because of their appreciation of medieval themes. But Romanticism adhered to an idealist notion of art, opposed to the realist tendencies of artists of the Enlightenment such as Chodowiecki and Rode.

#### PETER CORNELIUS AND THE IDEALIST TRADITION

Peter Cornelius (1783–1867) may be seen as the artist to have embodied the idealist notion of art most purely, and Cornelius is therefore the crucial starting point for any further discussion. After initial training at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art and a brief stay in Frankfurt, Cornelius had moved to Rome

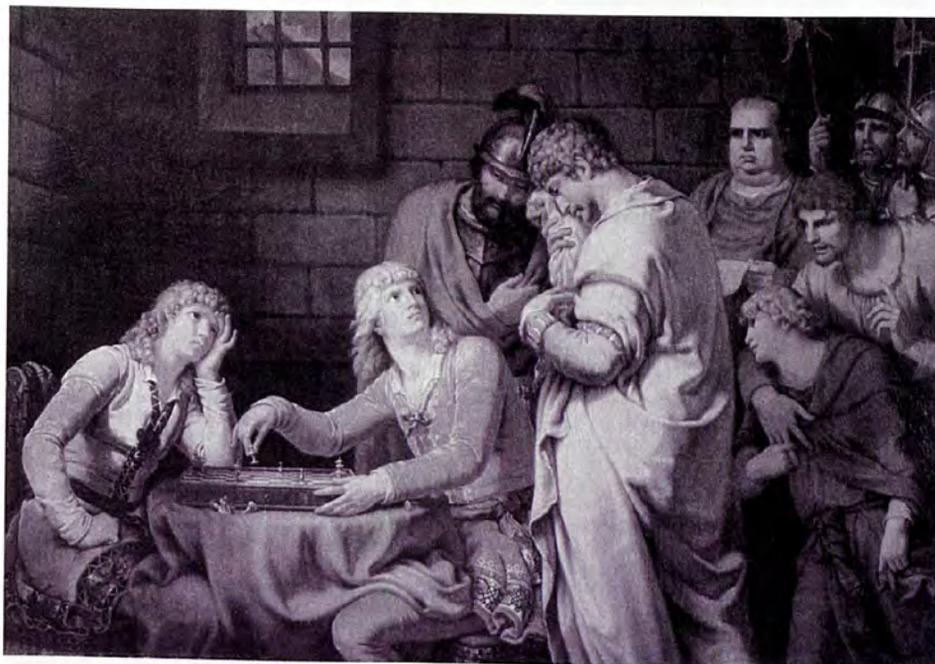


Fig. 2 Johann Wilhelm Tischbein, *Konradin of Swabia and Frederick of Austria Receiving their Death Sentence in the Prison of Naples*, 1784, oil on canvas, 170 × 244 cm, Schlossmuseum Gotha

in 1811, where he joined the so-called Lukasbund (Brotherhood of St. Luke), a group of young artists dedicated to a regeneration of art by reviving the spirit and style of early religious painting, which became the nucleus of the Nazarene movement. Cornelius fashioned a program 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 commissions, even though there he already found himself confronted with a realist-individualizing spirit.<sup>12</sup> With the concision characteristic of a painter of large fresco cycles Cornelius referred to the new *Geschichtsmalerei*, realist in inspiration, as 'invocations of ghosts', thus denigrating the attempt to create historically correct reconstructions in pictures with historical subjects.<sup>13</sup> 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 Clío*) something in common with the resurrection of the dead; it moves the depicted figures so close to the beholder that they – as would later be the case in film – appear to share his life.<sup>14</sup> 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 subject matter they insisted on the realization in the work of art according to historical principles, trans-temporal notions and trans-individual norms. Somewhat obscurely, but nonetheless plausibly, the quotation from Cornelius given above continues: 'Whoever returns into the original necessity of what originated in the past and grasps it will soon find not the same, but similar moments.'<sup>15</sup> What once happened is never merely a simple fact. An invocation of a lived past has its own necessity – it is the result of a logic which integrates it into a meaningful structure. This logic, for Cornelius, is 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 [...]'.<sup>16</sup> The 'event for and in itself', as Cornelius remarked disdainfully when confronted with pictures by Paul Delaroché, is shaped by 'trifles' and thus had to seem dispensable to anybody who posed the question of which higher truth was to be represented by the event.<sup>17</sup> What was crucial here was that the pure factuality of the past was not deemed worthy to reappear in the image. Only when it had a universal meaning would it deserve to engage the fantasy of the artist.

#### SEARCHING FOR THE 'CHARACTERISTIC'

Anton Springer (1825–1891), known to this day as one of the founders of modern art history, defended the opposite view. Sceptical about 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'.<sup>18</sup> His notion is determined by material density, that of his idealist opponents by spiritual depth. In the opinion of the latter, the single event is entirely irrelevant; what is relevant is its integration into a whole. 'Not the rings, even if they had been made of gold, but the chain itself – that

<sup>12</sup> See F. Büttner, 'The Frescoes of Peter Cornelius in the Munich Ludwigskirche and Contemporary Criticism', in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*, edited by A. Hemingway (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229–51. See also C. Grewe, 'Historicism and the Symbolic Imagination in Nazarene Painting', *Art Bulletin*, 89:1 (2007), 82–107.

<sup>13</sup> See M. Carrière, 'Peter Cornelius', in *Der neue Plutarch: Biographien hervorragender Charaktere der Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst*, edited by R. Gottschall (Leipzig, 1880), 327.

<sup>14</sup> S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 14 ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Carrière, *Peter Cornelius*.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. Söttl, *Die bildende Kunst in München* (Munich, 1842), 81.

<sup>17</sup> See K. Frenzel, 'Zur allgemeinen deutschen Bilderversammlung in München', *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, new series 3 (1858), 797.

<sup>18</sup> A. Springer, 'Die bildenden Künste in der Gegenwart', in *Die Gegenwart, eine encyclopädische Darstellung der neuesten Zeitgeschichte für alle Stände* (Leipzig, 1856), vol. 12, 717.

was the heart of the task', one reads in Max Schasler (1819–1913), a writer with anti-naturalistic leanings and deeply affected by the events of the revolution of 1848.<sup>19</sup> Schasler's comment ingeniously described the intention of the mural decoration for the Berlin Neues Museum. Designed by Wilhelm Kaulbach (1804–1874), the frescoes laid out the great events of world history, which Kaulbach intended to represent as a teleological development finding its Protestant-Lutheran fulfilment in the Reformation.<sup>20</sup> Kaulbach can be seen as the successor of Cornelius: as Director of the Academy of Art in Munich from 1849, he upheld the tradition of idealist mural painting during a period when this art-form faced serious competition from the kind of oil painting that leaned towards realism.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the Kaulbach murals were part of a series of major projects that later in the century led to large cycles frequently intended to legitimise Prussian claims to hegemony.<sup>22</sup> That many of these murals drew on decidedly realist modes of representation documents how much a changed *Zeitgeist* affected them.

Already before the revolution of 1848 the abstract conception of history and its representation – still valid for Kaulbach – became the subject of harsh criticism, a criticism inspired by the Young Germans' vitalistic aesthetics of action. I have already referred to Anton Springer, a major exponent of this tendency. Another was Franz Kugler who proclaimed that art was nowadays expected to 'penetrate life [...] in its full, fresh immediacy'.<sup>23</sup> This claim entailed a new organization of the hierarchy of genres, for the 'individual depth of the individual', as opposed to the objective depth of the universal of the idealists, could hardly be obtained in a mural painting, which is expansive and therefore lacking in psychological differentiation, but was more easily accomplished in highly detailed oil paintings. In this context, the contrast of genres (between mural and oil painting) and the geographical opposition (that is, between German and French art) became a trope. As an expression of the kind of idealism inspired by Cornelius, German painting was mural painting; as a realist art of real life, art was French oil painting. The Germans noted the 'crude factuality' in French art, whereas the French observed in German art a 'lack of life'. In this sense, Hippolyte Fortoul (1811–1856) saw Cornelius as a man who sought to capture life through forced movements.<sup>24</sup>

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 that artists should not 'paint anything that is not the possible object of vision, that cannot be factual'.<sup>25</sup> In the context of this convoluted process, art theoretical terms were significantly redefined as, for example, the notion of the 'characteristic'.

Since the characteristic was seen as the result of intense observation, idealist-neoclassical theory had rejected it in favour of the 'ideal'.<sup>26</sup> The artist seeking to represent the characteristic – in the felicitous phrase of art historian Friedrich Wilhelm Ungers (1810–1876) – listens to 'nature in its most hidden traits and most transient appearances'.<sup>27</sup> Rather than, one might say, using nature, as does the idealist, as the starting-point of a mental construction aimed at transcending nature itself, the realist artist makes nature the focus of extreme attention.

<sup>19</sup> M. Schasler, *Die Wandgemälde Wilhelm von Kaulbachs im Treppenhaus des Neuen Museums zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1854), 18.

<sup>20</sup> A. Menke-Schwinghammer, *Weltgeschichte als 'Nationalepos': Wilhelm von Kaulbachs kulturhistorischer Zyklus im Treppenhaus des Neuen Museums in Berlin* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Kaulbach in English see A. Ronen, 'Kaulbach's Wandering Jew: An Anti-Jewish Allegory and Two Jewish Responses', *Assaph. Section B: Studies in Art History*, 3 (1998), 243–62.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Wagner, *Allegorie und Geschichte: Ausstattungsprogramme öffentlicher Gebäude des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland. Von der Cornelius-Schule zur Malerei der Wilhelminischen Ära* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> F. Kugler, 'Sendschreiben an Herrn Dr. Ernst Förster in München über die beiden Bilder von Gallait und de Biefve' (1843), in *Kleine Schriften zur Kunstgeschichte*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart, 1854), vol. 3, 406.

<sup>24</sup> H. Fortoul, *De l'art en Allemagne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1841–42), vol. 1, 386.

<sup>25</sup> W. Herold, *Über die Stellung der bildenden Kunst in der Gegenwart: Ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte* (Halle, 1855), 64.

<sup>26</sup> See E. Krückeberg, 'Das Charakteristische', in *Historisches Wörterbuch für Philosophie*, edited by J. Ritter, K. Gründer and G. Gabriel, 12 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), vol. 1, cols 992–4.

<sup>27</sup> F. W. Unger, *Die bildende Kunst: Ästhetische Betrachtungen über Architektur, Skulptur und Malerei für Künstler und Kunstfreunde* (Göttingen, 1858), 127.

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 represents 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'.<sup>28</sup>

#### MENZEL PAINTING FREDERICK THE GREAT

This turn towards 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 the 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'.<sup>29</sup> Köster leaves no doubt that the liberating potential of the past seems even greater to him the further back that past dates. Yet Menzel's subject matter not only lacked such distance, it also was not suffused with the 'scent of myth' that Julius Große (1828–1902), another mid-century ally of the Nazarenes, considered essential for the realization of the ideal.<sup>30</sup>

Great chronological distance and the scent of myth can both 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' (that is medieval and Renaissance) art, holds up the 'ideal of the great man' against the 'specificity of a person', considering only the former as worthy of pursuit.<sup>31</sup> Wolfgang Menzel (1798–1873), who after initial sympathies for the Young Germans had later in life emerged as a culturally conservative moralist, made a critical appeal to the Belgian *Geschichtsmaler* (painters of modern realist history), whose depiction of Belgian history celebrated spectacular successes in the 1840s: 'when you paint a hero who is meant to enchant us, he ceases to be the particular historical hero and turns into some general ideal'.<sup>32</sup> In opposition to Quandt and Wolfgang Menzel the representations of Frederick by Adolf Menzel were as specific as could be. As we shall see, they were not thinkable 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 – or 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 strived for greater (historical) reality, when he 'entirely delves [...] into external action', that is to say, when he no longer derives his construction from a pre-existent idea, then it becomes impossible 'to search for meaning and the idea behind the external appearances;' instead meaning is located precisely in the external appearances.<sup>33</sup> Meaning began to oscillate freely and to constitute itself only in collaboration with the beholder who

<sup>28</sup> E. Guhl, *Die neuere geschichtliche Malerei und die Akademien* (Stuttgart, 1848).

<sup>29</sup> C. Köster, *Zerstreute Gedanken-Blätter über Kunst*, fasc. 1–6 (Mannheim, 1833–48), see fasc. 6 (1848), 26. *Gedankenkunst* can be translated as 'ideational art', 'art of ideas' or 'art of the mind'.

<sup>30</sup> J. Große, *Die deutsche allgemeine und historische Kunst-Ausstellung zu München im Jahre 1858* (Munich, 1859), 100.

<sup>31</sup> See J. G. von Quandt, 'Der Parallelismus zwischen ausübender Kunst und deren Literatur', in *Allgemeine Monatsschrift für Literatur*, 1 (1850), 61ff.

<sup>32</sup> See W. Menzel, 'Rezension zu E. Guhl, *Die neuere geschichtliche Malerei*', *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser. Literaturblatt*, 19 (1848), 279.

<sup>33</sup> See Springer, 'Die bildenden Künste', 737.

had to participate in constituting it, a fact whose importance for modern art cannot be overestimated. In what follows I will try to bring this intellectual context to bear on the analysis of selected representations of Frederick. Such a procedure precludes the possibility of viewing these images as simple statements of a Prussian worldview, as has frequently happened in the reception of Menzel during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

#### ADOLF MENZEL'S IMAGES OF FREDERICK

Very soon after the revolution of 1848 Menzel 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. In so doing, Menzel returned to a subject matter without an established tradition, but which he himself had extensively explored from the later 1830s onwards, most famously in the afore-mentioned illustrations for Franz Kugler's *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*. 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*. Instead of focusing on these famous but (in the context of our discussion aesthetically) less rewarding icons, I examine some equally well-known, but more fruitful works, the *Petition* (Fig. 3), *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch* (Fig. 5) and the *Address of Frederick II to his Generals before the Battle of Leuthen 1757* (Fig. 7).

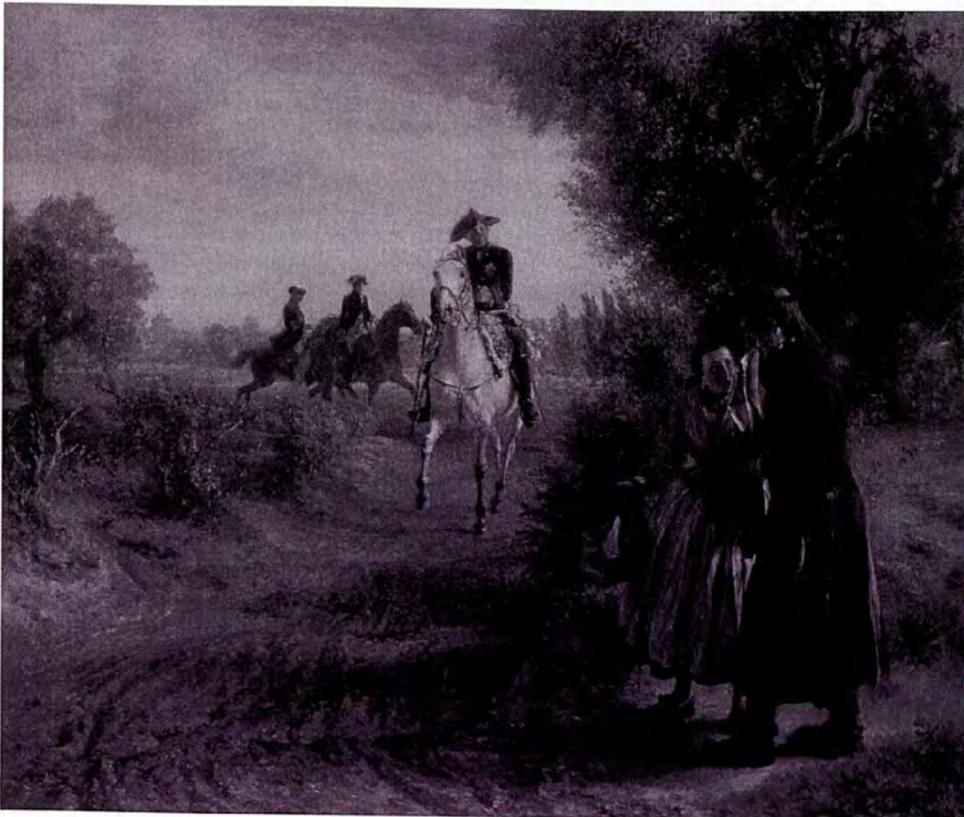


Fig. 3 Adolph Menzel, *The Petition*, oil on canvas, 60 × 75 cm. 1849, Private Collection

With the *Petition* (Fig. 3), one of three *Geschichtsbilder* to be analysed here, Menzel chose a subject that paradigmatically embodies the idea of a liberal post-absolutist King living for the well-being of his people, whom already Kugler had exalted with touching phrases. We do not need to concern ourselves with the fact that the image of Frederick sketched out by liberals like Menzel or Kugler was probably also intended as a model for the reigning King, Frederick William IV. Instead, we shall focus on the conception and narrative structure of this small painting, which measures a mere 60 × 75 cm, because these two aspects shed light on the work's extreme position *vis-à-vis* the dichotomy of realist and idealist notions of art.

The picture's composition is simple. The King is approaching on an unpaved path, which runs towards the beholder; while his features lack detailed characterization, the King is nonetheless clearly recognizable. Behind him, at an appropriate distance, two adjutants follow their majesty. Although still at some distance, Frederick looks with interest at two young farmers positioned in the right foreground, a man and a woman. The two appear engaged in an animated discussion, a fact highlighted by a comparison with the corresponding illustration in Kugler, where two young couples glance devotedly towards the King who waves at them in the background.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the man in Menzel's oil version seems hesitant, looking towards the ground, as if somewhat ashamed. Lifting a piece of writing to his lips, he listens to the woman beside him, who talks at him with obvious intensity, the wrinkles of her face expressing downright despair. The narrative context becomes comprehensible as soon as the viewer remembers the custom of passing urgent requests directly to the King who, by all accounts, was frequently able to remedy the situation in person. How does the image deal with this issue? To answer this question, we shall compare Menzel's solution with a later picture by a Hugo Ungewitter (1869–1944), both of which – artist and image – have since been justifiably forgotten (Fig. 4).

Menzel and Ungewitter differ in particular in one aspect. In the case of Ungewitter, a student of the master class at the – by then extremely conservative – Düsseldorf Academy, the idea of the event corresponds much more closely with its *Anschaulichkeit* (clear visual presentation) than in Menzel's image. What is meant by that? Put simply, Ungewitter chooses to depict the pregnant moment of the event itself, while Menzel chooses a moment of the event's – immediate – prehistory. In Menzel's version the petition will be handed over in – let's say – five seconds, in Ungewitter's in less than half a second. Admittedly, this is an unusual way of analysing an image, but in my opinion this reading touches upon a crucial element of the work that is constitutive for its meaning. Ungewitter focuses his apparently naturalistic scene on the story's central idea, that is, the handing-over of the petition. Only the length of the horse's neck, so to speak, still lies between the depicted moment and the action's completion. This is not the case in Menzel's picture. In fact, strictly speaking (and of great importance for the painting's effect), it is ultimately not yet transparent whether or not the action will occur at all in the manner to be expected. This ambivalence obviously conforms to the painter's intentions. Menzel deliberately presents the couple in the foreground in an intense and as yet not concluded discussion. Or rather, while it is indeed imaginable, even probable that the woman will succeed in convincing her hesitant companion to hand over the petition to the royal rider, this outcome is all but certain. The scene in the foreground has its own narrative focus that does not entirely overlap with the address to the King. The two farmers are precisely not shown in an expectant turn towards the King, but still concerned with themselves. Thus, they obtain independent psychological depth, which in turn prevents the representation from exhausting itself in a mere encomium of the ruler, as is the case in Ungewitter's work.

This fact can also be described from the vantage point of the specific characteristics of the medium. One almost gains the impression of encountering a film still. Admittedly, this association is anachronistic regarding the mid-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, one may observe a proximity to photographic effects, which greatly contributed to the de-idealization of the image. Where an *Ideenkünstler* (idealist artist) would have tried to remedy what the time considered the shortcoming of painting – that is, its inability to depict more than one moment in time – by scattering the various elements across the

<sup>34</sup> F. Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*, 581.



Fig. 4 Hugo Ungewitter, *The Petition*, oil on canvas, size and location unknown, from: *Friedrich der Große und seine Zeit in Bild und Wort. Mit Text hauptsächlich nach Kugler*, edited by Bruno Schrader (Hamburg, Hansa-Verlag: 1915), 174

composition in service of one central idea, Menzel does the opposite. He emphasized the chronologically centrifugal quality of the moment by characterizing the action of the couple in the foreground in a (temporal) openness that corresponds closely to the spatial distance between the farmers and the approaching King. In so doing, Menzel accepts the danger of obscuring the course of the narrative or even the narrative itself. This procedure is realist in the sense of Anton Springer in as much as the artist indeed 'delves into the external action completely'. Thus, the even is not stylized according to the consideration of an 'inner action'.

In traditional history painting, a painting's focus was on the so-called 'fruitful moment', a moment that in the words of a Johann Michael Sötl (1797–1888) 'contains within itself an entire series of occurrences' and makes the successive culmination point both evident and plausible.<sup>35</sup> According to my interpretation, this is precisely not the case in the *Petition*. Menzel eliminates a fictional element and clearly characterizes the image as the result of unbiased observation. By reducing the narrative's predictability and clarity, he heightens the feeling of the chosen moment's authenticity and thus reinforces the scene's realism; in turn, he weakens the narrative's potential as a carrier of meaning. Similar observations can be made with regard to other and more ambitious works of Menzel's Frederick series. Characteristic for the contemporary understanding of these works is the statement of a critic from the *Kreuzzeitung*, who in the face of Menzel's *Flute concert* maintained that the painter 'stayed clear of

<sup>35</sup> See fn. 16 above. Sötl, active as professor of history at the University of Munich, was influenced by the idealistic orientation of the art produced in this city.



Fig. 5 Adolph Menzel, *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch*, 1850–56, oil on canvas, 295 × 378 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin (presumed lost)

any so-called historical style and represented the event in the most lively and drastic-effective manner'.<sup>36</sup>

The likely destruction of Menzel's picture *Frederick and Those Close to Him at Hochkirch* (Fig. 5), painted between 1850 and 1856, is in my opinion one of the greatest losses of World War Two, when it comes to nineteenth-century painting.<sup>37</sup> The 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 it ended in one of the most noteworthy, albeit not lastingly damaging defeats of the Prussians during the Seven Years War. 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 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 watches him from behind his

<sup>36</sup> *Kreuzzeitung*, 4 (November 1852).

<sup>37</sup> Adolph Menzel, *Friedrich und die Seinen bei Hochkirch, 13./14. Oktober 1758*, oil on canvas, 295×378 cm, 1850–56 (once Berlin, Nationalgalerie).

back, their faces filled with concern and dismay as their King is exposing himself to the enemy's hostile fire. In the meantime, the foreground is filled with soldiers trying to climb up a slope from the lower right. The Austrians do not appear, and are alluded to as the targets of the Prussian platoons positioned left of the centre, which desperately try to beat back the enemy offensive. Menzel's decision to focus only on one half of the battling forces was more than unconventional, and indeed decidedly non-classical. A passage from the wide-read book *Grundlagen zu der Lehre von den verschiedenen Gattungen der Malerei* illustrates this point. Published in 1823 by Adam Weise (1776–1835), an engraver and writer on art who had emerged from the Romantic circle around Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, the instruction manual proclaims: 'In battle equal force is distributed; boldness of attack, 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.'<sup>38</sup> Here, quite literally, 'classical' means 'balanced', and only the state of equilibrium grants truth to the action depicted. The combination of several moments is crucial as it guarantees the 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.'<sup>39</sup> This view, propagated by Ignatius Jeitteles (1783–1843) in his *Ästhetisches Lexikon* (a work that fully reflects the status quo without going beyond it), ultimately reached back as far as the Italian architect and art theoretician Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) 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 appears comprehensive. Only when it is comprehensive can 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 *Geschichtsmalerei*. Wilhelm Kaulbach's *Battle of the Huns* of 1834–37 (Fig. 6) appears to me to be a good example. I even consider it possible that Menzel's motif of soldiers desperately staggering up a slope was a satire on Kaulbach's vision of dead soldiers who ascend to heaven, where they continue to fight. One should know that Kaulbach was a source of irritation for Menzel.<sup>40</sup> Also, Kaulbach's conception would not have been to Menzel's liking, for it represented a mythical scene, commemorating a legend concerning the fight between the spirits of fallen Huns and Romans before the gates of Rome.

The *Hochkirch* picture was not comprehensive in one further respect: It emphasized the moment in such an exaggerated manner that Karl Frenzel (1827–1914), a liberal with national orientation who wrote for the journal *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, maintained Menzel would pay attention 'only to reality, to the moment'.<sup>41</sup> 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 overconfidence in victory which led to it. No more than just an attack.'<sup>42</sup> Frenzel rightfully observes that the work hints 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 the picture its intensity, even brazenness. 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*

<sup>38</sup> A. Weise, *Grundlagen zu der Lehre von den verschiedenen Gattungen der Malerei* (Halle and Leipzig, 1823), 121.

<sup>39</sup> I. Jeitteles, *Ästhetisches Lexikon: Ein alphabetisches Handbuch zur Theorie der Philosophie des Schönen und der schönen Künste*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1836–7), see article on 'Bataillenmalerei'.

<sup>40</sup> See C. Dieltz, 'Menzel und Kaulbach – Erinnerungen', *Die Kunstwelt*, 3 (1914), 412–8.

<sup>41</sup> See Karl Frenzel, 'Zur allgemeinen deutschen Bilderversammlung in München', *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, 4 (1859), 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 6 Wilhelm Kaulbach, *The Battle of the Huns*, c. 1835/37, oil on canvas, 137.5 × 172.4 cm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

of this famous artist turned into a genre picture.<sup>43</sup> 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. And this eyewitness acts as an actor in *Geschichtsmalerei*, not in *Historienmalerei*.

Ocular testimony must be understood entirely literally here, albeit impossible in an historical event. A *Geschichtsmaler* like Menzel comprehends himself as *present* in front of the event, observing it as if happening in real life. He thus differs from the *Historienmaler*, who *imagines* this event. When a critic of the Deutsches Museum accused his countrymen of seeing too much with the eyes of the mind, instead of paying attention to the physical act of looking, he turns precisely against the kind of idealist *Historienmaler*, who, like Cornelius, saw in the historical event nothing else but the crystallization of God's thought.<sup>44</sup> One might have expected Menzel to view Frederick in the battle of Hochkirch with the eyes of the mind if he had been following the prescriptions of conservative art criticism. Two aspects of his painting, however, demonstrate most succinctly Menzel's rejection of these prescriptions. First, he painted the Prussian King with reduced sovereignty; second (and inseparable from it), he represented him too small. A contemporary description of Menzel's picture as 'a true photograph

<sup>43</sup> See *Deutsches Kunstblatt*, 9 (1858), 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Deutsches Museum*, 5 (1855/2), 79ff. ('Zur Kunstaussstellung bei der Weltausstellung in Paris').



Fig. 7 Adolph Menzel, *Address of Frederick II to his Generals before the Battle of Leuthen 1757*, 1858–61 (unfinished), oil on canvas, 318 × 424 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin

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.<sup>45</sup>

That the King dominates the painting at first, but seems scarcely able to assert himself against the figures in the foreground at second glance, is more than a subjective impression about which we could quarrel here; it 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.'<sup>46</sup> The spatial qualification – and this is the moral 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 of the figure of Frederick. One surmises that 'the appearance of the King is perhaps not sufficiently powerful', another sees in him a 'pale ghost'.<sup>47</sup> And that the suddenness and shock of the attack appears in the face of almost every Prussian soldier, might be permissible, but that they also appear all too clearly in Frederick's face was, in Frenzel's opinion, unacceptable.<sup>48</sup> It limited the fundamental freedom of the classical hero who had become the victim of the progress of the action. He has lost his dominance, in particular with regard to the figures in the foreground.

<sup>45</sup> *Die Zeit* (26 September 1856).

<sup>46</sup> D. R., 'Ein Gang durch die akademische Kunstausstellung zu Berlin', II, *Frankfurter Museum*, 2 (1856), 404.

<sup>47</sup> 'Kunstnotiz', *Düsseldorfer Zeitung* (3 November 1857); anonymous, 'Die deutsche Geschichtsmalerei', *Stimmen der Zeit*, 2 (1859), 348.

<sup>48</sup> K. Frenzel, 'Zur allgemeinen deutschen Bilderversammlung in München', *Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd*, new series, 4 (1859), 22.

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 (1821–1895) 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'.<sup>49</sup> This resemblance to group portraiture resulted in a paratactic composition, whose underlying principles do not confirm with the spirit of traditional history painting, a fact subtly noted by the critic Andreas Oppermann (1827–1896), who – as brother-in-law of the famous Dresden sculptor Ernst Rietschel – 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 hotchpotch of the astounding.'<sup>50</sup> The 'unified total impression' is lost, the whole is divided into its parts. Even with the best of intentions, Julius Große complained, one cannot arrive at a clear impression of the event.<sup>51</sup> 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 questioned 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.

I want to end with a brief discussion of the last picture of the Frederick series, in many respects the most confusing, the *Address of Frederick II to his Generals before the Battle of Leuthen 1757* (Fig. 7). The subject is not a battle itself, but its moral preparation. Tradition has it that in an almost hopeless situation Frederick delivered a dramatic speech to his generals, encouraging them to the utmost. In this case we do not have the opportunity to analyse the reactions of art criticism to this picture extensively, because Menzel never finished it and therefore never presented it to public criticism.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, contemporary reactions can be reconstructed by implication, because the criticism seems to have affected Menzel's attempts at modifying the work. In one of the most important contributions to Menzel scholarship, Claude Keisch has demonstrated that this criticism came from the highest place, that is, from the Prussian King himself, and that it addressed what the ruler must have seen as a simply outrageous composition; and indeed, the corresponding illustration in Kugler is much more moderate.<sup>53</sup> The composition was outrageous for two interconnected reasons: first, because of the gigantic, extremely unusual figure of Maurice of Saxony in the foreground, an oppressive presence when standing in front of the original, because the general seems to fall forward out of the picture; second, because of the hardly representative position of the King within the image. Apart from the fact that he is present only as a tricorne, little emphasis is put on him; he is positioned away from the beholder towards the left, and moreover almost entirely turned towards the back, hardly impressive in comparison with the generals some of whom, by contrast, are characterised overly incisively. How did artists approach this subject in the context of a return to idealization during the period of rapid economic expansion of Germany in the decades around 1900? An answer, prefiguring solutions such as that of Ungewitter, can be found in the work of Fritz Roeber (1851–1924), likewise a secondary painter, but nonetheless commissioned to decorate the Hall of Fame in Berlin (Fig. 8). In the time-honoured tradition of history painting the King is here restored as the decisively dominating focus of the image. Indeed, going beyond this tradition, he is emphasized in so unsubtle a way that one may feel reminded of Hitlerite principles.

Let us relinquish Roeber to oblivion and return briefly to Menzel's Leuthen picture. There is no assurance of victory here, but doubt, no heroism of action, but reflection preceding action. In the sense of

<sup>49</sup> The review appeared on the occasion of the painting's presentation in the Prussian pavilion at the Paris World Fair. Paul Mantz, 'Adolphe Menzel. Le Grand Frédéric à Hochkirch', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 23:1 (1867), 140.

<sup>50</sup> A. Oppermann, 'Nach der historischen Kunstaussstellung', in *Anregungen für Kunst, Leben und Wissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1859), 67.

<sup>51</sup> See fn. 30 above.

<sup>52</sup> Adolph Menzel, *Ansprache Friedrichs II. an seine Generale vor der Schlacht bei Leuthen 1757*, 1858–1861, oil on canvas, 318×424cm (Berlin, Nationalgalerie).

<sup>53</sup> C. Keisch, 'Adolph Menzels "Ansprache Friedrichs des Großen an seine Generale vor der Schlacht bei Leuthen": Vermutungen über ein unvollendetes Meisterwerk', *Forschungen und Berichte der Staatlichen Museen Berlin*, 26 (1987), 259–82; Kugler, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*, 355.



Fig. 8 Fritz Roeber, *Address at Leuthen*, cartoon for the 'Hall of Fame' in Berlin, 1899, size unknown (destroyed in WW II), from: *Die Kunst für Alle*, 16 (1901), 211

the ocular testimony of the *Geschichtsbild*, the painter attempts to evoke the moment's despair and to liberate it from our historical knowledge about the battle's positive outcome, accessible only to posterity.

#### CODA

The starting point of my analysis was the distinction between *Historienmalerei* and *Geschichtsmalerei*. The former reflects the classical idealist model still 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. The results of this shift could 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 disempowerment. Details that distract from the centre of the image are 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 it on.

*Translated by Thomas Frangenberg and Cordula Grewe*

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