

**Shadow Cast
by the Altar
Decoration in
the Augustinian
Church in
Würzburg**

1890, graphite and
stumping, 8¼ x 5.
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Graphite

in the Hands of an Indisputable Master

Whether at a court ball or at a burial, on the street or in a moving train, the German draftsman **Adolph Menzel** (1815–1905) exploited every opportunity that presented itself to record on paper whatever caught his eye. | **by Ephraim Rubenstein**

Adolph Menzel's late drawing *Houses Behind Leafless Trees* is a tour de force of graphite wizardry. The artist's view takes us soaring into space over rooftops, through a scrim of bare tree branches that makes the most delicate of patterns in the foreground. As the buildings retreat into the distance, they become more and more simplified abstract shapes, increasing the sense of distance in the picture. The drawing is filled with air, space, light—without the use of color. It displays every conceivable type of mark, tone, line, and erasure that one can make with the medium. Using lines of varied thickness, as well as tones ranging from the gritty roughness of unmodulated graphite to areas of velvety stumping, the artist created a drawing with the spatial and atmospheric complexity of an oil painting. This drawing of modest size sums up

the staggering technique that Menzel acquired through a lifetime of looking and responding, and it demonstrates the level of sophistication that can be wrought from the humblest of drawing instruments—a carpenter's pencil.

One of Menzel's favorite sayings was, "To draw everything is good, but to draw *everything* is better." This motto not only belies the voracity of Menzel's visual appetite but also accounts for the staggering variety of subjects in his oeuvre. According to art historian Gisold Lammel, "Whether at a court ball or at a burial, on the street or in a moving train, he exploited every opportunity that presented itself and recorded on paper whatever caught his eye. Menzel was always equipped with all of the necessities for drawing. These necessities included having eight pockets of his overcoat filled with sketchbooks, as well as a tailor-made pocket for other drawing supplies.

The sheer number and range of Menzel's drawings speak of an artist who took his sketchbook around with him everywhere. I imagine him reaching into his jacket pocket for his sketchbook as quickly and surely as some men reach for their wallets. Everything was fodder for his eye, an eye so quick and sure that Degas called him "a walking optic nerve." The operative word here is walking, indicating that Menzel was always on the move, looking and recording. In addition, he had a remarkable memory and could reconstruct scenes from memory with uncanny accuracy. Like Leonardo, if someone caught Menzel's fancy, he would follow them around all day and then go home and draw them perfectly from memory that night.

Furthermore, Menzel drew things that other people would only consider painting—drawings not so much of objects, but of atmosphere, space, and light. His *Houses Behind Leafless Trees* is reminiscent of Pissarro's late views from the Louvre over the Tuileries. Consider Menzel's *Cloudy Sky*, or any of his numerous drawings of clouds. It is not as if no one else attempted to depict such amorphous subjects; one can well imagine Constable setting up his easel on Hampstead Heath and painting the scudding clouds in oil, or Sargent—having taken cover from a violent downpour—coming out at its conclusion and trying to capture a rainy road in watercolor. But without the dimension of color, there is so little with which to work. Few artists other than Menzel would have taken up the same ambitious, painterly subjects not in full color but in black and white.

Menzel's early life and training can partially account for his lifelong orientation toward black and white. At a young age, he showed a talent for drawing, which his father encouraged by apprenticing him in the family lithography business, first in their hometown of Breslau, in present-day Poland, and later in Berlin, Germany, to which the Menzels moved to in 1830. Commercial lithography, a black-and-white process, was commonly used to reproduce paintings and illustrations for mass distribution. Therefore, the whole concept of translating color sensations into value became second nature to Menzel. He made sporadic attempts to enroll at the Berlin Academy, where he worked in the cast-drawing hall as well as in the life class. But he

RIGHT

Richard Menzel, the Artist's Brother

1848, black chalk, 9% x 14%. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

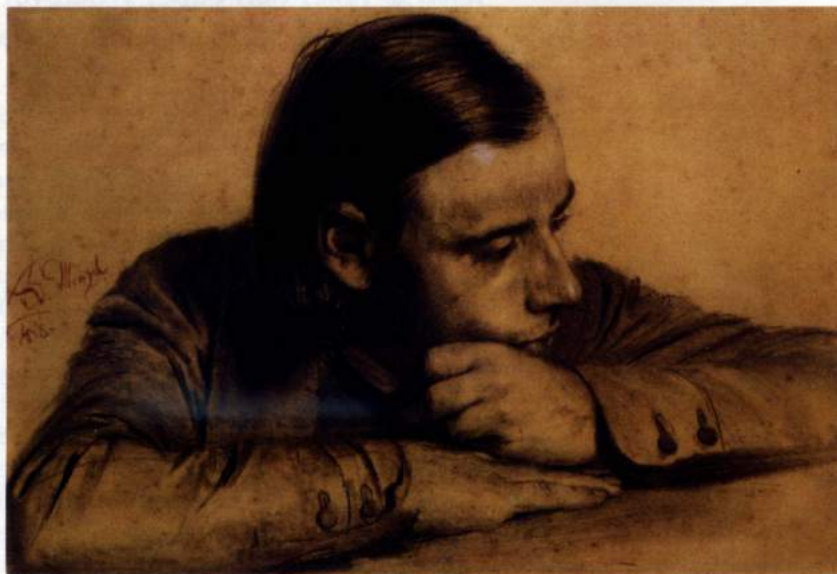
Houses Behind Leafless Trees

1893, graphite and stumping, 9 x 12¼.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Choirstalls in Mainz Cathedral

1869, gouache, 12¼ x 9%. Collection Landesmuseum, Mainz, Germany.





Using lines of varied thickness, as well as tones ranging from the gritty roughness of unmodulated graphite to areas of velvety stumping, Menzel created drawings with the spatial and atmospheric complexity of an oil painting.



Cloudy Sky

ca. 1880–1890, graphite and stumping, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 13.



seems to have always had an aversion to instruction, and after several attempts at schooling he gave up, deciding to teach himself whatever he needed to know.

Menzel's autodidactic nature served him extremely well. His father died unexpectedly when Adolph was 16, and the teenager had to drop his studies and go to work full-time to support his mother and siblings. In addition to running the commercial jobs of the lithographic business, Menzel also began getting commissions for illustrations, largely projects relating to Prussian history and scenes from the life of Frederick the Great. These were invariably either pen-and-ink drawings, woodcuts, or lithographs, so again Menzel had to translate the entire visual world—in all of its vividness and transitoriness—into black and white.

Because of all of the demands on his time, Menzel had a hard time getting started in painting. Apparently, it was only after seeing two landscapes by John Constable on exhibit in

Berlin at the age of 24 that Menzel was inspired to start painting seriously in oil. But despite Constable's inspiration, Menzel ultimately found gouache—with its shorter brush, finer point, and application onto paper—more amenable to his taste than oil. He felt that it behaved more like drawing than oil painting and acted as a kind of bridge from painting to drawing. Throughout his lifetime, he would primarily go back to gouache when he needed color for a piece.

Although he drew in many other media, Menzel is best known for his use of the soft carpenter's pencil, the medium in which he made some of his most radical innovations. Of all the various forms of graphite available during Menzel's time, the carpenter's pencil was perhaps the best for sketching and rendering broad effects. It lent itself perfectly to the kind of effects Menzel was trying to capture, and certainly no one had ever wrought so many different effects from a carpenter's pencil before. By association, the

**Frederick II's
Room at the
City Palace in
Potsdam**

1840, graphite,
8 3/8 x 5 1/2.





RIGHT
**Detail of the Tomb
of the Prince von
Thurn und Taxis
at St. Emmeram in
Regensburg**

ca. 1890, graphite,
7 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{16}$.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Old Documents
in a Chest**

ca. 1880-1890,
graphite, 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 5.

Menzel's draftsmanship was so precise that he was able to simplify the most complicated and detailed of subjects into a handful of airy tones.

instrument's grainy, broad stroke has become essentially Menzel; if Ingres has his extra-hard graphite and Seurat his soft Conté crayon, then Menzel has his carpenter's pencil.

Although Menzel's drawings, like those of many artists, started out harder and more decisively linear, they quickly became broader and more tonal. The emphasis in his drawings went from a literal description of things—specific objects in the world—to a more poetic description of the air, space, and light that surrounded those objects. In the drawing of the City Palace at Potsdam, for instance, we feel Menzel painting with the graphite, rendering the smoky shadows in the corner of the room as if he were knocking it all back with a dark glaze. The sense of space in the drawing is palpable; not only do we immediately sense the distance from the doorjamb to the far wall, but we feel as if we could enter it, walking past the fine furniture and perhaps even catching a glimpse of ourselves in the dusky mirrors. He even managed to capture that smell that historic houses have—the shut-in scent of a once-living place that has become a museum.

As his drawings developed, Menzel increasingly favored tone over line. His draftsmanship was so precise that he was able to simplify the most complicated and detailed of subjects into a handful of airy tones. These tones had tremendous range from black to white, and all of them—even the darkest darks—were full of air and light. In *Detail of the Tomb of the Prince von Thurn und Taxis at St. Emmeram in Regensburg*, Menzel gives us an electrifying sketch of a grave monument in an old church. There is only a handful of barely discernible contour lines—the vast majority of the drawing is wrought out of tones. The column bases, sarcophagus, and grim sculpture are not so much separated by outlines as they are joined together by tones. Contour lines, which are traditionally used to separate things, here become edges rather than barriers and act to join all of the elements in light and air.

Menzel always sought out unusual subject matter and radical vantage points from which to view it. In this tomb drawing, Menzel set himself up way over to one side, so that the viewer's eye slides quickly along the top of the sarcophagus, running directly into the skeleton. Mysteriously shrouded in flowing cloth, the grim reaper sits like a spider waiting in his sinister web.

Menzel always tried to avoid drawing anything from straight on—a typical or boring vantage point. He always made a point of moving around, trying to find a radical view-point, one that would make you look at the subject again. In his *Old Documents in a Chest*, he has the viewer looking down, vertiginously, into a trunk containing old books and packages of papers. The downward orientation is only part of the effect of the drawing—the trunk itself is skewed off on the diagonal so that its corners play marvelously with the corners of the paper. How much less interesting it would have been if he had lined it all up and everything were parallel! There is also





the Hitchcockian mystery of the trunk, its lid creaking and musty, having just been opened for our inspection, the results of which move the unknown narrative forward.

With continued mastery, Menzel began to take greater risks and made more radical innovations with both his subject matter and its treatment. Always a painterly drawer, he made increasing use of the stump in his later years. Menzel exploited the difference between the raw, granular tones that first go down and the smooth, stumped tones that he rubs to make so velvety. As he got older, Menzel eschewed even the carpenter's pencil itself, using the dirty end of the

stump as a paintbrush to lay down pure tones. In *Shadow Cast by the Altar Decoration in the Augustinian Church in Würzburg*, a preponderance of the drawing has been stumped. The altar itself is stroked in using the pencil to make short lines and very sure dark strokes. But the shadow is done completely with the stump. All of the graininess is gone. The flickering light on the wall is as velvety as imaginable, starting out darker at the bottom and then gently fading away as the light moves toward the ceiling.

In his last years, Menzel's drawings became extremely abstract, and his subject matter grew more radical. The same impulse that warned him to avoid the obvious postcard view of a given subject and to instead seek more out-of-the-way corners and obscure angles also led him to forsake any kind of narrative in favor of drawings that were purely about unusual shapes and effects of light. In *Narrow View Between Two Houses*, Menzel gives us a depiction not so much of the houses themselves but of the alley between them, with a focus on the intermediate space. In conventional terms, this is a drawing about nothing. The white of the paper, which represents the sky seen between the jagged edges of the tile roofs, becomes an amazingly unexpected interstice, an electrifying piece of negative space that Menzel charged with much positive energy.

Similarly, *Interior of a Barn, in Shadow* focuses on nothingness, on empty space. The drawing is so far along on the road to abstraction that Menzel gives us absolutely as few clues as possible in order for us to just make out the subject. The suggestion of the tiled roof, the two little squares of light from the far wall, and the ends of the ladder propped up against the wall relieve us from the anxiety that this drawing



OPPOSITE PAGE

Narrow View Between Two Houses

1894, graphite, 7¼ x 4¾.

LEFT

Interior of a Barn, in Shadow

1897, graphite, 8¼ x 5¾.

might be about nothing—a pure abstraction with no ostensible subject. The shadow is the subject of this drawing, and Menzel depicts it beautifully. Menzel's shadows—even the darkest of them—always have tremendous luminosity. He uses his stumping to take down his darks, much like a painter might apply a dark glaze to push back a tone, but he is always careful to leave some light flickering through so that the shadows do not go dead.

Another quality that makes his drawings veer toward abstraction is their suggestiveness. As art historian Claude Keisch writes, in Menzel's late drawings, the artist "suggested infinitely more than he actually portrayed." *Houses in the Moonlight* is a perfect example. The drawing does not represent the houses themselves so much as the experience of the eye struggling to make out amorphous, indeterminate forms in low light. When we peer out into the night, are we ever sure of what we are seeing? This uncertainty is what the drawing addresses.

Right Leg of a Man, which depicts the artist's own body, best summarizes Menzel's attitude toward drawing, as well as his belief in drawing. He was 80 years old when he drew it, underscoring that up until the very end of his life, Menzel never felt himself to be without a subject. He was the guy who always had something to draw. You could lock him alone in a room, and so long as he had a piece of paper and some light, he would find something worth ren-

dering. Even if the room were empty, there would always be his own body to draw. The drawing is a complex amalgam of views; the larger leg and foot were drawn looking down at his own leg, whereas the other foot must have been seen in a mirror, which accounts for its angle, as well as for its being so much smaller. As with all Menzel drawings, the realization of the leg and foot is concrete because the artist takes up the subject in space. The little pieces of dark tone surrounding the foot itself are crucial in establishing the space that the foot occupies.

From very traditional origins, Menzel's drawings became startlingly innovative. His vision is reminiscent of the project of early photography, with which it was concurrent. It reminds me of early photography, not in its look but in its encyclopedic nature. The advent of photography gave artists the dazzling, emancipating sense that the world existed to be photographed, catalogued, and collected in all of its infinite variety and munificence. Anything could be the occasion for a drawing, and as art historian Philip Conisbee noted, "this aesthetic elevation of the ordinary trivia of everyday life into the stuff of art is a strong aspect of Menzel's appeal in our time." For Menzel, the world existed to be drawn in every which way, defying boundaries and categories. In addition to their breathtaking beauty, one looks at Menzel's drawings and says, "Wow, who would have thought to draw that?" ❖

RIGHT
Houses in the Moonlight
ca. 1890, graphite.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Right Leg of a Man
1894, graphite and stumping, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{8}$.



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