

Menzel's lurking about!

by Michael Glasmeier

The more clearly and distinctly, more realistically things find themselves depicted, the more complex the play of perceptions and questions becomes. It is precisely the simple, the banality of the everyday become image that on closer inspection begins to drift off into the drama of the Symbolic or to founder in pure doubling. For the observer, the visual forms of an incidental reality shift between these two poles. While abstraction can easily summon up the myth of the inexplicable and a cult of the artist, thus reclaiming a certain remainder of faith, the realist enters the space of truths, which can be likened to a scene out of Dante's Purgatory, where Belacqua fruitlessly sat waiting to inspire Samuel Beckett.

All sorts of constructions of intellectual history attempt not so much to do justice to realism's contradictions, but rather methodically seek to level these contradictions. This becomes particularly clear in the case of Adolph Menzel (1815–1905), on first look a straightforward Prussian, and one whose work hardly reflects the breaks typical of the life of the modern artist. Instead, we find in Menzel a tireless worker, industrious in the best sense of the word, spartanic, sarcastic, small in stature, an "old bachelor," as he himself self-critically put it.¹ It is the almost boundless quantity of the work itself—his memorial exhibition in 1905 was comprised of 5699 works²—as the expression of non-stop production through old age that is also able to contain the contradictions in a quantitative sense, thus making it possible for each of the various phases of reception up to the present day to construct their own respective Menzel. There's the "patriotic" Menzel of the Friedrich paintings, the bourgeois Prussian Menzel of the depictions of historical events, the sympathizer with the bourgeois revolution, the court artist decorated with medals, the positivist and later "hero of the working class," a forerunner of impressionism and twentieth

century modernism, the Berlin Menzel and the international Menzel. Of course, these attempts to incorporate Menzel are the expression of the historical temporal rifts and social ideologies in Germany from the Kaiserreich to reunification. Only the most recent large-scale Menzel retrospective, held in Paris, Washington, and Berlin in 1996 and 1997, accepted the contradictions under the title "The Labyrinth of Reality," and spoke of "universality," "modernity," "moment," or "failure." But even here it was ultimately fitting in with the times.³

Despite all these various constructions, there is a dominant consensus that Menzel is an observing artist in search of authenticity. Even his Friedrich paintings were preceded by an extensive study of the visual historical material. Detail must be accurate, even if long subject to museum storage. Menzel's archive of the visible, laid out in countless drawings, sketches, and studies, forms the basis for a Lichtmalerei of the atmospheric that celebrates the unspectacular everyday life of a king in contrast to the period's heroic historicism. A utopian regime of reason shimmers through; disillusion would follow later.⁴

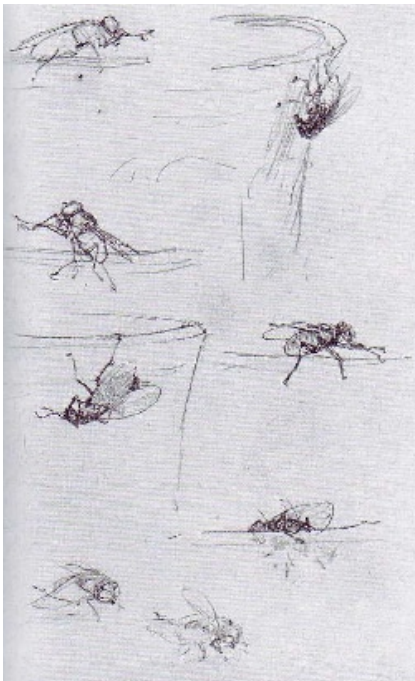
With this obsession for historical detail, it is only a small step from the museum to the street, and from here to the modern production site "Eisenwalzwerk" ["Iron Rolling Works"] (1872–73). In the small gouache that emerged parallel to this epochal painting, "Selbstbildnis mit Arbeiter am Dampfhammer" ["Self Portrait with Worker at the Steam Hammer"] (1872), the forge illuminates the a protagonist operating a powerful metal tongs in the fire, a muscular figure with pipe and hat, concentrating on his task with his back half turned toward us, while two additional workers stand about in the narrow shadows behind him on the left. This image could be a heroic one if it were not for Menzel himself with hat, glasses, and a white beard, seen sitting in the background on the right, hidden behind a cart, watching the workers, once again drawing in a small sketchbook with his left hand. Menzel is the other worker who in an almost Spitzwegian manner deprives the sweating body its superior power through his mere presence. A realist at work: small, unobtrusive, and just as intent. This gouache, which alongside sketches of particular poses of workers as well as tools and machines prepared the way for Eisenwalzwerk, is unique in the artist's oeuvre. It is also stands in complete contrast to the late work "Besuch im Eisenwalzwerk" ["Visit in the Iron Rolling Works"] (1900), which also shows in the foreground a worker engaged in hard labor, while on the left a jovial greeting scene among capitalists is played out, complete with lady and dog. Menzel the satirist: yet another unstudied aspect.

In art historical terms, "Selbstbildnis mit Arbeiter am Dampfhammer" could be classified among the self-portraits of artists at work, common since the Renaissance. Following in this tradition, the work might serve to indicate that Menzel locates his subjects in everyday life.⁵ It would then be one of the few works in the history of art with disegno as its subject.⁶ The largest group of Menzel's drawings could





then be dismissed as mere studies and sketches for later paintings. But in fact, this truly small picture (16 x 12.5 cm) is programmatic: it shows us an attitude towards reality that goes beyond pure observation and the addiction to authenticity. If the realist Gustave Courbet (1819–77) conceives his studio painting as a massive riddle (359 x 598 cm), an *allégorie réelle* in which the world gathers, Menzel is in the world;⁷ he is live on the scene. His pose in the gouache attests to this: it shows us his full face, which is engaged in intent observation. The points of light on his glasses construct the direct reference to the scene, and the hand draws directly into his sketchbook. Since the hats of both worker and artist are placed at the same level, the difference in size, both actual and in terms of perspective, is abolished, the space of distance is bridged over. Both operate on almost the same hat and/or eye level. The cart the artist is standing behind marks the distance, the objectivism of the drawing subject, a distance that at the same time is overcome by the gaze through the reflecting eyeglasses. The cart might become the next subject of Menzel's drawing observation.



Through his art, this dwarf is able to place himself on the same plane as the muscle man. His self-reflexive, almost voyeuristic status in this image makes all equally important, for the eye of the artist everything becomes equally significant, and we thus find in the accompanying sketches to “Eisenwalzwerk” not only workers with tongs, but carts as well. Menzel is thus here also less an artist of *disegno*, where he draws as part of the preparation for a painting,⁸ or in his famous words: “All drawing is useful, as is drawing all.”⁹ Hence, his work seems without goal or plan. It records his own foot just as it does the Kaiser's robe, the paint jar just as the crowds of people, the comb as well as the lowly creature, the baroque altar as well as the clouds. Only the erotic and the unbroken beauty of the naked figure are left out.

Menzel cavorts about in the purgatory of truths and, contrary to the taste of the time, does not idealize the ladies of the Berlin court, whose balls the “enfant terrible among the historical painters” (Jules Laforgue) attended. The ladies warned one another: “Der Menzel geht um!” [“Menzel's lurking about!”].¹⁰ A different Menzel anecdote was reported by Max J. Friedländer from a Berlin café: “He had ordered a poached egg and fell asleep over it. The egg is brought, without waking him. He soon wakes with a fright, squints at the plate, presses a piece off the edge with the fork, tastes it with long teeth and placed the fork back down: the egg is cold. From one of the many pockets of his coat, he digs out one of the legendary sketch books and draws the poached egg.”¹¹



It is the incidental aspect of “concrete life” that Menzel confronts, whether or not it is called forth by the planning of a particular painting. Painting seems to be more the exception, hard work for the right hand of the left hander, who had his hands modeled in 1903 by Reinhold Begas, where the right hand holds the brush and the left the pencil, beloved above all else. Even if Menzel is here idealizing, and it can be shown that he did not exclusively work with his right hand while painting, for him the left hand with which he began his career as an artist was assigned to the free space of drawing, which incidentally also can be noticed in the typical manner of his typical left leaning shading lines.¹² The left hand was responsible for the truth of a poached egg after his nap. As Lucius Grisebach put it: “The concrete and the individual in the object were life for him, that with precise and sober registration developed more and more. It was this life that he traced out, precisely and intently. He dedicated all his talent and his strength to it, and in it refined and developed his art, protected from the danger of pure virtuosity by the unflinching honesty of his own critical eye.”¹³

Menzel's practice is disturbing because it does not allow itself to be classified: the contradictions find no resolution. It was only during the twentieth century that the reality of the incidental was to become a central path in all areas of the arts. Think here of Marcel Duchamp, Pop Art, the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit or the Bauhaus, or the poetics of a Franz Kafka or Robert Walser. But it must be said that here Menzel is even more radical with his Prussian distance. His drawings rely on the pure presence of an object or a visibility of light or movement. This presence is barely aesthetically adjusted or systematized. For every subject seems to demand a highly individual style of drawing all its own. Although stylistic traces of development can be traced out with great precision up to the almost abstract situation paintings and the fantastic use of the rubbing technique,¹⁴ but on closer observation even such attempts at sorting break down again and again from subject to subject.

Nonetheless, Menzel's unique attitude towards reality can only be more precisely defined in historical and methodological terms by way of an artistic and a literary-political position. Beside the Netherlan-

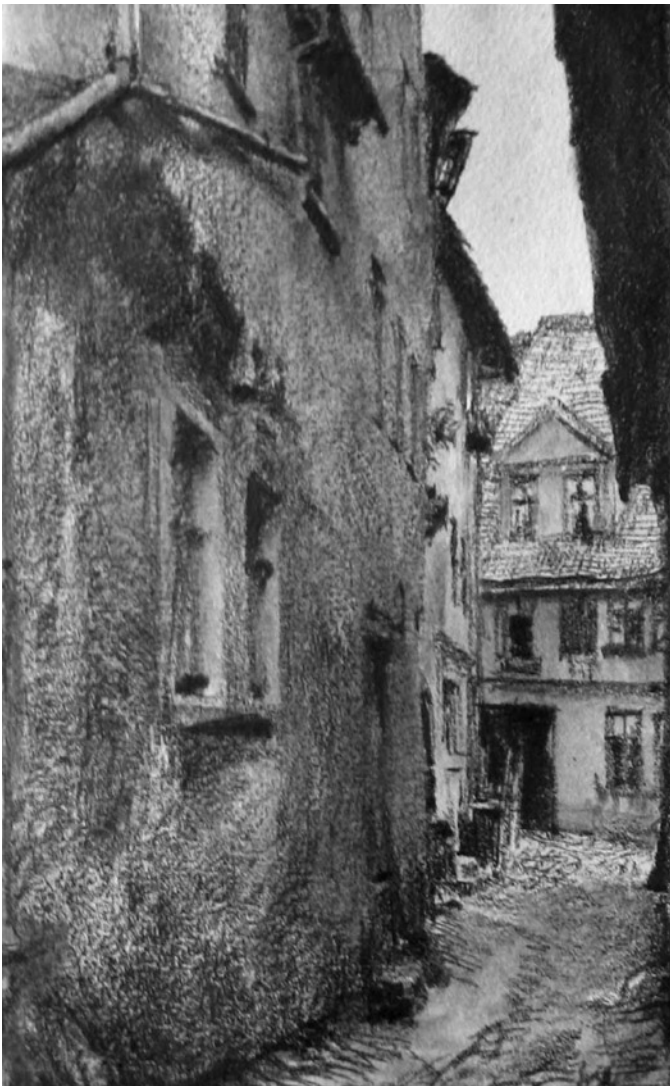
dish painters of the seventeenth century, who in the second half of Menzel's life progressively replaced the then contemporary adoration of the Italians, one of his most important models was the German, "national" Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) whose work is also characterized by illustrations, print graphics, paintings, and above all drawings that are also not clearly assignable to the category of *disegno*, but which bore witness to plants, animals, spatial situations, as well as banal pillows and ink wells. Menzel: "[...] our task is now to do in our time what this Phoenix [Dürer] did in his own."¹⁵

In his theoretical writings on art, Dürer was the first to explicitly divorce the concept of beauty from the object, subsequently signing his sketches and drawings, dating them and adding commentary to them. Erwin Panofsky on this: "It is illuminating that no European language has an equivalent for the German words 'Handriss' and 'Handzeichnung' ('hand-drawing') which stress the fact that the hand of an individual person has rested on this very piece of paper, imparting to it a sentimental value not unlike that of a personal souvenir or a relic – a hand-written letter, a hand-signed document, a hand-embroidered handkerchief."¹⁶ Dürer as well as Menzel draw their hands as "acting nerves of sight,"¹⁷ but God's grace in the nineteenth century had in the meantime been replaced by a prosaic artistic "undulation", a "Künstlers Erdenwallen."

Such an obsession with the hands, such a capacity to objectivize subjective ways of seeing on the one hand in the play of eye and pencil, on the other hand to give expression to the artistic subject in the drawing, even more convincingly than in painting, can be linked to the attitude of the reporter. By way of an unwitting coincidence, it was left to Egon Erwin Kirsch to provide a brilliant description of Menzel's method. In the foreword to his 1927 book "Der rasende Reporter" [„The Racing Reporter“], Kirsch writes: "The reporter has no political leanings, has nothing to justify and no standpoint. He is to be an unbiased witness and to provide an unbiased account as reliably as any statement at all can be made, at any event it is more important (for clarification) than the ingenious speech of a prosecutor or defense attorney [...] The good [reporter] needs the ability to experience for his trade, which he loves. He would also experience [erleben] even if he were not to report anything about it. But he would not write without experiencing. He is not an artist, not a politician, not a scholar, he is perhaps Schopenhauer's 'platter Mensch,' but all the same his work is very important 'due to the material'. The places and phenomena of which he writes, the explorations he undertakes, the history he witnesses, and the sources that he seeks out need not be so distant, rare, or difficult to reach, if in a world immeasurably overflowed with the lie, a world that wants to forget itself and thus satisfies itself with untruth, he maintains a devotion to his object. Nothing is more shocking than the simple truth, nothing is more exotic than our surroundings, nothing more fantastic than objectivity. And there is nothing more sensational in the world than the times in which one lives."¹⁸

In Menzel's drawings, traditions of artistic subjectivism in Dürer's sense overlap with a tendency towards the objectivity of reporting. The corporeal linkage of hand to eye that Menzel's painting seeks to level by craftsmanship takes on drawn form in the banality of a "sensational" everyday life. It is only now that we can truly grasp the significance of Menzel's pose in "Selbstbildnis mit Arbeiter am Dampfhammer:"

Menzel is so much the reporter that he ignores the then contemporary principles of composition, especially in the drawings, which cannot be called sketches. This led to the accusation that he is merely a craftsman,¹⁹ that is, in Kisch's sense "not an artist." In addition, he often stages the objects of his interest so that they are not centered, but cropped as in a photograph, and as already mentioned he undertook an amazing amount of research, both on location or in the museum, in particular for his historical images.



In 1921, Max Liebermann discusses the "Question of Menzel's Art in the Age of Photography"²⁰ and comes to the conclusion "that his artistic conscientiousness in a sense dissected the structures of his own creative invention and thus threatened to rob his art of the highest of all things, its life."²¹ it could be said that while Liebermann was surely quite interested in Menzel the impressionist, as far as Menzel's sense of reality was concerned thought along more conservative lines of creative genius. In this way, it is possible that innovation can seem traditional, while the supposedly traditional can serve as innovation.

With his sketched commentaries on the photographs of weapons and armor at the Historische Museum in Dresden, Menzel himself took a position on this question.²² His marginalia provide what the photograph can no longer provide: a view from below or a side view, certain details. For reality is never offered up on a platter. It must be found

in the most various atmospheres, perspectives, spatial situations. Such a differentiation could only in part be offered by nineteenth century photography, and for so long did the particular moment remain bound to the drawing hand.

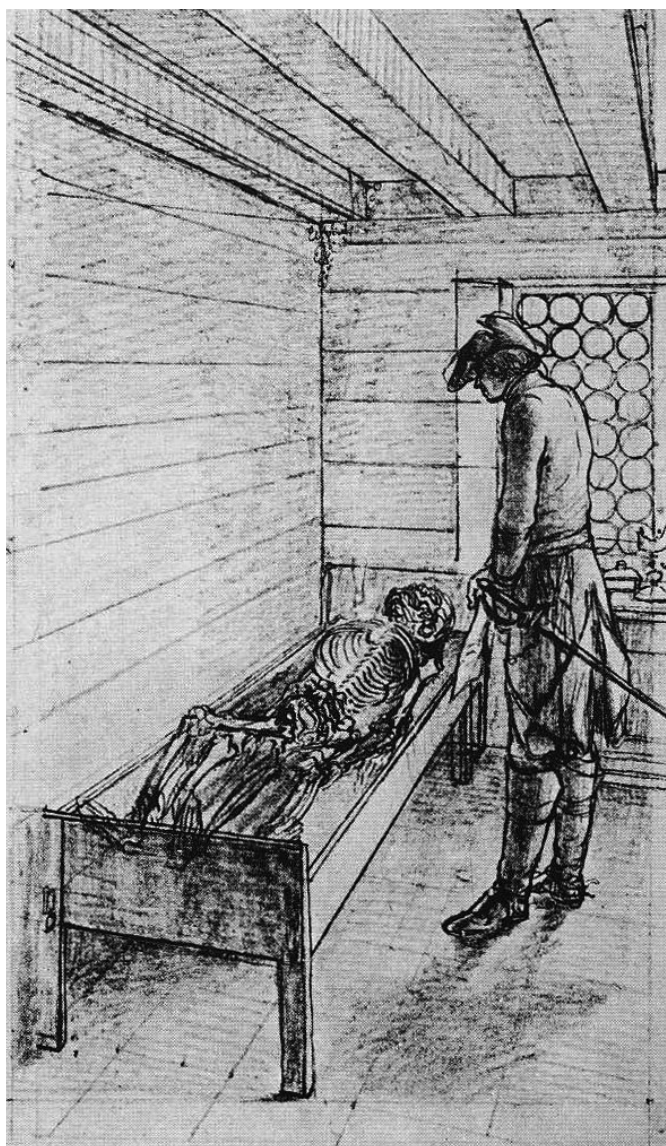
We can get the most vivid conception of Menzel the reporter in his confrontation with death. This existential, liminal experience has always determined the masterworks of art history, since it is precisely this question that often can drive the horrible realism of which art is capable to the limits of the bearable. Menzel, who was always unsatisfied with his war paintings, plagues himself for six years with the now lost "Friedrich und die Seinen beim Nachtkampf zu Hochkirch" ["Friedrich and His Own in the Night Battle at Hochkirch"] (1850), and even leaves his "Ansprache Friedrichs des Großen vor der Schlacht bei Leuthen" ["Address of Friedrich the Great before the Battle of Leuthen"] unfinished. He is lacking in experience as a war reporter, experience he is allowed to gather in 1866 at the battlefield of Königgrätz. Here, he records the dying and suffering of the wounded in three horrifyingly precise water colors, then forever to turn away from war painting:²³ "For patriotic requirements, the needs are covered by other things, and above all, must this horror then be painted?"²⁴

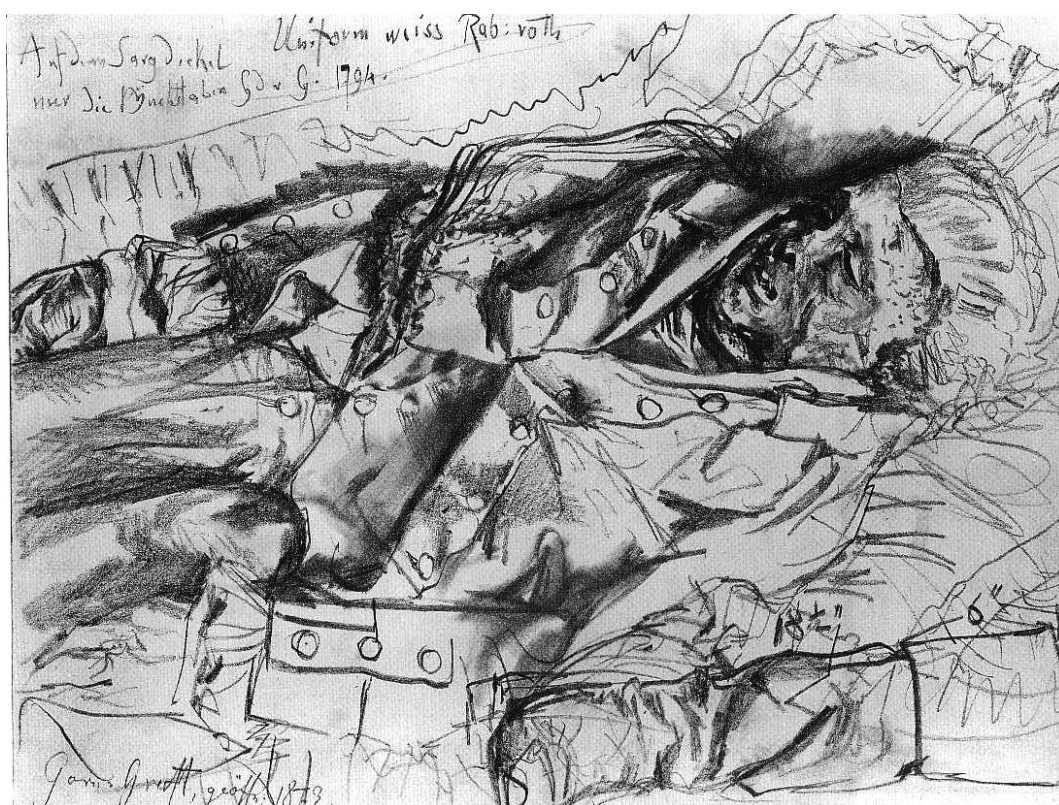




But even without war, Menzel is confronted with death, albeit in a museal way. After attending the 1852 opening of the crypt of the Frauenkirche in Halberstadt, we encounter a record in 1873 in the crypt of Berlin's Garnisonskirche. This was overcrowded, and the corpses had to be identified before they were in part moved to the Hohenzollern crypt in Berlin's Protestant Cathedral. Here, Menzel is a physiognomist of death, the corpse-like rigidity in Prussian uniforms that also seduces him to engage in visual commentary.²⁵ Impressive however are the empty-eyed faces, and he conceals neither the shot in Field Marshall Keith's mouth nor the mummified state of a soldier's skull.

If these views of death from war and the crypt are lacking in today's discussion about the frightful images of terror, torture, and the presence of global horror, this is perhaps due to a lack of awareness. But we must conclude that Menzel did do justice to the truth of purgatory in all its facets with his drawings. The concept of the reporter here introduced does not resolve the contradictions in Menzel's work as a whole, but it can serve to thicken the contours of these contradictions in order to characterize a realism capable of "unbiased witnessing."





Anmerkungen

- 1) Zit. n. Jost Hermand: *Adolph Menzel in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1986, S.107
- 2) Ebd, S.127
- 3) Vgl. Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. *Das Labyrinth der Wirklichkeit*. Hrsg. v. Claude Keisch u. Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher, (Ausstellungskatalog) Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz, KälN1997
- 4) vgl. Hubertus Kohle: „Menzel als Historienmaler“. In: Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. A.a.O., S.481-492; Susanne von Falkenhausen: „Zeitzeuge der Leere - Zum Scheitern nationaler Bildformen bei Menzel“. Ebd. S.493-502; Michael Glasmeier: „Ein mechanischer Flätenkönig. Anmerkungen zu ‚The King’s Part‘“. In: Rodney Graham. *Cinema Music Video*. (Ausstellungskatalog) Kunsthalle Wien, Brüssel 1999, S. 31-43
- 5) Vgl. Hermann Ulrich Asemissen, Gunter Schweikhart: *Malerei als Thema der Malerei*. Berlin 1994
- 6) Vgl. Michael Glasmeier: „Ansichten von Zeichnungen“. In: Gundel Mattenklott, Friedrich Weltzien (Hg.): *Entwerfen und Entwurf. Praxis und Theorie des künstlerischen Schaffensprozesses*. Berlin 2003, S.75-86
- 7) Vgl. Klaus Herding: „Das ‚Atelier des Malers‘ - Treffpunkt der Welt und Ort der Versöhnung“. In: Ders. (Hg.): *Realismus als Widerspruch. Die Wirklichkeit in Courbets Malerei*. Frankfurt am Main 1978, S.223-247
- 8) Vgl. Lucius Grisebach: *Moltkes Fernglas, der Köchin Lenas Kamm und das Tintenfass auf dem Tisch der Akademie: Menzels Blick für das Konkrete*“. Ders. (Hg.): *Adolph Menzel. Zeichnungen, Druckgraphik und illustrierte Bücher*. (Bestandskatalog) Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin 1984, S.18-21
- 9) Zit. n. Jost Hermand, a.a.O., S.85
- 10) Ebd. S. 91
- 11) Zit. n. Lucius Grisebach, a.a.O., S.20
- 12) Vgl. zu diesem Thema Ulf Küster: „Links zeichnen, rechts malen? Adolph Menzel und seine Hände“. In: *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, Bd.41, 1999, Beiheft (Adolph Menzel. *Im Labyrinth der Wahrnehmung. Kolloquium anlässlich der Berliner Menzel-Ausstellung 1997*)
- 13) Lucius Grisebach, a.a.O. , S. 20
- 14) Vgl. Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher. „Der Zeichner - Meister des Augenblicks“. In: Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. A.a.O., S. 445-456
- 15) Zit. n. Hubertus Kohle: „Adolph Menzel als Kunsttheoretiker“. In: *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, a.a.O., S.185
- 16) Erwin Panofsky: *Das Leben und die Kunst Albrecht Dürers*. München 1977, S.377

- 17) Axel Delmar, 1905, zit. n. Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. A.a.O., S. 406
- 18) Egon Erwin Kisch: *Der rasende Reporter*. Berlin, Weimar 1990, S.5f.
- 19) vgl. Lucius Grisebach, a.a.O., S.20
- 20) Peter-Klaus Schuster: „Menzels Modernität“. In: Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. A.a.O., S.412
- 21) Zit. ebd., S. 415
- 22) Vgl. Werner Hofmann (Hg.): *Menzel der Beobachter*. (Ausstellungskatalog) Hamburger Kunsthalle 1982, S. 200-205
- 23) Vgl. dazu Claude Keisch: „Menzel, die Toten, der Tod“. In: *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, a.a.O., S.33-52
- 24) Zit. ebd., S.38, Anm. 25
- 25) Vgl. Adolph Menzel. 1815-1905. A.a.O., S. 264-268