

## “UNREIGNED” DRAWING

### MENZEL AND CHODOWIECKI

When he found himself obliged to the “Verein Berliner Künstler” due to a generosity bestowed upon him, Menzel decided to gladden his colleagues with a representative gift that was meant to recommend to them his own artistic program as a path to take. He painted the posthumous, life-sized portrait of the Berlin artist and miniaturist Daniel Chodowiecki, as whose student and successor he regarded himself. Menzel never met his role model, who, like himself, worked his way up from a modest artisan background to become a member of the “Berlin Künstlerschaft”. The most popular illustrator of his time in Berlin had already died fourteen years before Menzel was born.

Chodowiecki had left behind a huge oeuvre that to a large part consisted of series of copperplate engravings with which he had routinely illustrated all kinds of narrative works, reports and textbooks of his time. As a portrayer of a modest, bourgeois, Prussian life-world, Chodowiecki was still quite present during Menzel’s time due to his moralising series reproduced as copperplate engravings. Especially those of Frederick the Great were still widespread, with which he laid the iconographic foundations for the idealisation of the philosophic soldier-king and which also provided an indispensable model for Menzel’s own historical canon of motifs. But it could hardly have been the Chodowiecki noted as being the painter-representative of a past, extremely outdated epoch whom Menzel intended his artist colleagues to take note of.

In Menzel’s painting, the illustrator of Prussian history is depicted neither in a representative court setting nor in the private, domestic domain, shown in many of his copperplates, which



Menzel, Chodowiecki auf der Jannowitzbrücke, 1859  
(Sammlung Georg Schäfer, Schweinfurth)

simultaneously served as his studio. Instead, he is portrayed outdoors somewhere in Berlin. Leaning against a parapet, his gaze is furtively directed at something taking place outside the picture, while he simultaneously draws in his sketchbook. Like Menzel, Chodowiecki was obsessed with drawing, and both had in common a great distaste for the period's abstract, academic rules. In his biographical notes<sup>1</sup>, he states that he had profited little from copying plaster models but very much from drawing after nature.

He says, it is important to do these drawings as "furtively as possible" so as to perceive one's models in a most natural state. Hence, the drawings must be made with the necessary haste, "as far as the steadiness of the persons allow for". (drawings at page 4) He admits to not even shying away from voyeuristic keyhole views. Menzel's artistic imperative of drawing everything is modelled on and starts with Chodowiecki's exercises.

In his draft biography, he states to have drawn while "standing, walking, and riding".

In his portrayal of Chodowiecki, Menzel captured his characteristic mouth with the drawn-in upper lip in such a pointed way that it almost appeared as a caricature. The loss of two incisors, which most likely led to this physiognomy, resulted from one of his acrobatic drawing feats. carried out on horseback with the reins in his mouth – and then the horse stumbled.

In view of the statue-like sedateness of the scenic representations, it is difficult, today, to understand the impression of extraordinary liveliness he made upon his contemporaries. Yet they do possess a realistic, down-to-earth trait, resulting from the numerous observations of everyday life at the time, a trait that greatly distinguished his graphical art from the airy gallantries of rococo illustrations.



Chodowiecki, Porträtstudien, 1758  
(Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig)



Chodowiecki, russischer Gefangener, 1758  
(Kunstsammlung zu Weimar)

<sup>1</sup> In Wolfgang von Oettingen: Daniel Chodowiecki. Ein Berliner Künstlerleben



Chodowiecki, Sketch (Städelsches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt)



Chodowiecki, Sketch (Muzeum Narodowe Gdansk)

Classically-minded Goethe perceived Chodowiecki's art only as an antipode of his own idealistic conceptions. For Goethe, he was a typical representative of an unfortunate "Berliner conception of art" in which "naturalism with the demand of reality and usefulness is at home" and "the prosaic Zeitgeist" reveals itself most.

While learning lithography, young Menzel had been confronted with Goethe's aesthetic convictions due to a commission to illustrate his poem "Künstlers Erdenwallen". In his vehement aversion against the image of a genial artist expressed in the poem – in a later letter he even speaks of real disgust – lies a clear plea for a Berliner, artistic prose in the style of Chodowiecki. In this respect, Menzel's gift, which made a rather harmless, carnivalesque impression through the juxtaposition of the realistic environment and the Baroque-style costume, possessed the character of an aesthetic manifesto advocating the exact opposite of carnival and historicism.

The topicality of Chodowiecki's art and its proximity to Menzel's reportage drawings is revealed nowhere better than in the graphical report on a trip he took in 1773 from Berlin to Danzig to make a long-promised visit, after a 30-year absence from his native town, to his mother and sisters. The planned two-week stay in the Pommeranian Hanse town soon turned into two



Chodowiecki, Sechs Damen und Selbst, Radierung, 1758

months, for he was commissioned to portray many members of the city's Polish nobility. He repeatedly edited the numerous drawings created during the journey over the next three years and supplemented them to form a portfolio work comprising 108 pencil sketches and pen-and-ink wash drawings, arranged in the chronological sequence of events. The series of drawings that came into the possession of the Berliner Akademie der Künste after Chodowiecki's death<sup>2</sup> depicts the stations of a dangerous journey through a Polish region ridden with civil war and annexed by Prussia during the course of Poland's first division, and his subsequent encounters and experiences in Danzig.

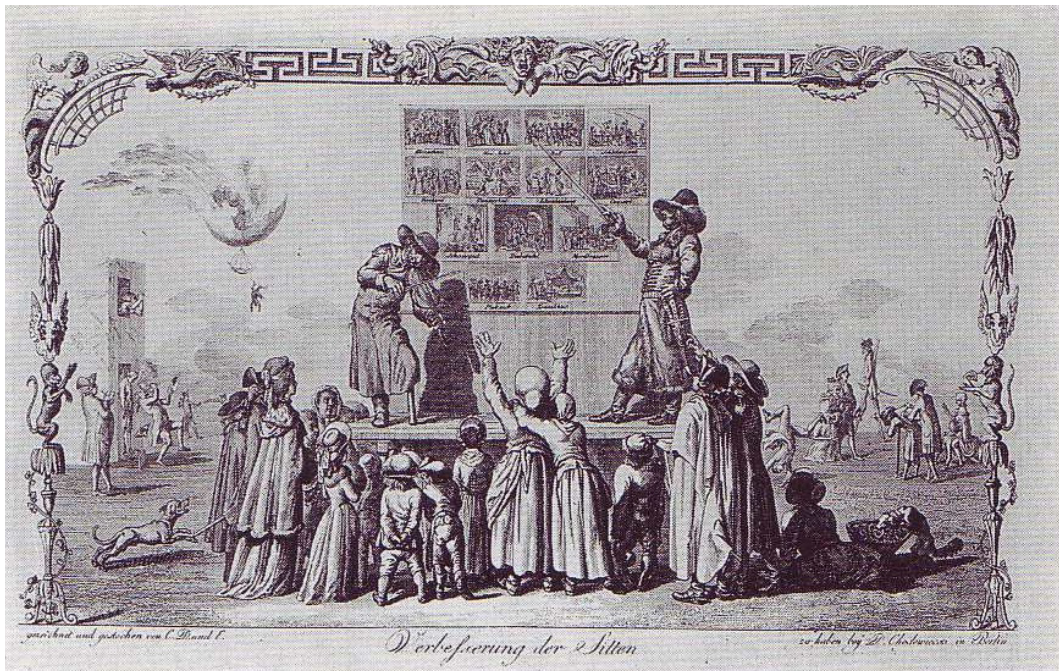
The series of pictures are both the account of a journey and a family album, but, above all, a report on Chodowiecki's drawing itself, because in most sheets he included himself in the role of the drawing observer. These self-assurances of his own involvement constitute a figure of eyewitness account to be found throughout his entire graphical work and that only a century later was to become topical as a specific iconographical topos in reportage drawing. 11 In his portrait of Chodowiecki from 1859, Menzel immortalized this self-reflective, observer-figure, popularised in the mid-1850s on account of the graphical magazine reportages on the Crimean War and the Italian unification war.



Abb.: Duran – Brager, Special Artist selbst im Krimkrieg, L'illustration, 1856

A Baroque predecessor of this modern profession of reportage draughtsmanship can already be found in a satirical engraving by Chodowiecki from 1786, titled "Verbesserung der Sitten oder: die merkwürdigsten Scenen Berlins", in which a small man can be seen in the left background using drawings to report on stories of murder and manslaughter conveyed by street-ballad singers.

<sup>2</sup> now as a loan in the collection of the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett



Chodowiecki, Verbesserung der Sitten, Radierung, 1786



Chodowiecki, Verbesserung der Sitten, Radierung, 1786 (Detail)