



THE SCALP IN THE GRID

Menzel and the Development of the Illustrated Press

The critical opinion reviewers had of 19th-century German press drawings and illustration art was quite sobering in its overall tenor and can easily be reduced to: There's Menzel, and that's just about all. Indeed, it took until the late 1880s for the contours of draughtsmen with a profile of their own to be noticed, artists like Theodor Rocholl and Christian Wilhelm Allers, who were capable of breaking loose from the influence exerted by the grand and omnipresent Menzel.

The work with which the young lithographer, even before starting to put out feelers towards painting, catapulted himself into the premiere league of international illustration art overnight, as it were, was the history volume, "Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen (History of Frederick the Great)", by the Berliner art historian Franz Kugler, for which Menzel drew close to 400 drawings within the course of three years.

The work was published by the Leipzig-based publishing house of the Basle publisher Johann Jakob Weber. Weber had moved to the centre of the German-language book trade in 1832 to establish a branch of the internationally operating bookstore and publishing house, Bossange père. It was most likely thanks to his initiative that Bossange, soon afterwards, published a German edition of the very first illustrated magazine, Penny Magazine. As editor-in-chief of Pfennig-Magazin, Weber made a name for himself as a pioneer of the illustrated press in the German-speaking world.¹

The path this illustrated monthly periodical had taken from its mother edition established in London in 1832, via the French licensed edition (*Magasin Pittoresque*) published by Bossange, to the German edition appearing a short time later under Weber's direction, greatly influenced the further development of the illustrated press.

The continental editions of these Biedermeier-style, educational gazettes consisted to a large part of the material and the literary themes drawn from the original English edition. The travel reports and cultural reportages were illustrated by wood engravings, a peculiar and eccentric printing technique that had been developed in England as early as the mid-18th century and that now, in the wake of the victorious magazine format, became a top-selling export service of the British Empire. Due to the lack of local specialists, even the illustrations for the editorial contributions of the continental editions of *Penny Magazine* had to be engraved by British xylographers.



Wood engravings were as appropriate as metal engravings for detailed illustrations, but their utilization in the illustrated press possessed a huge advantage: The relief printing method was suited to constitute a unified printable entity with the blocks of letters of the forme. Within just a few years, it thus superseded the gravure and planographic methods that had hitherto been without competition in the field of image printing in mass-circulated publications.



Menzel, too, who like many later reportage draughtsmen had been trained in lithography and was to a large extent an autodidactic draughtsman, was unexpectedly confronted - through the illustration commission for the book on Frederick - with the prospect of seeing his drawings transformed into wood engravings and with a guild of engravers who, due to the uniqueness of their technique, knew how to assert themselves self-confidently vis-à-vis the creators of the drawings to be copied.

Early special artists² such as Constantin Guys or William Simpson were skilled in coming to terms with the unconventionalities and self-will of their xylographic interpreters and viewed the final engraved results more in the vein of collective improvisations. But not Menzel. Although some of his earliest drawings consisted in copies of wood engraving models from the Pfennig-Magazin, his apprenticeship as a lithographer had accustomed him to the ideal of preserving the original when printed and he could not accept the capers of xylographic renderings.

Upon examining a first batch of wood engravings after his drawings, which Weber, due to the lack of a functioning network of skilled local engravers, had commissioned to British specialists at the Parisian studio, *Andrew, Best & Leloir*³, Menzel is said to have angrily cried out that he would not put up with "such a rascal maltreatment of my drawings by those messieurs." He found the relief plates that were returned from the London-based xylographic studio Sears to be much too rough and compared the London engravers' craft with that of carpenters. Merely one work from the British studio was subsequently

included in the work and it is characterized foremost by a routine fleetingness in the rendering of lines.

When examining the engravings later made under Menzel's direct supervision, one can clearly discern the importance he attached to clear spatial structuring and an increased plasticity in the treatment of figures. The interiors were now no longer rendered as nebulous background settings but merged with the acting figures to form a pictorial unity, the lively presence of which Franz Kugler compared with a "daguerreotype-like reality".

It is often claimed that Menzel and his publisher laid the engravings completely in the hands of local xylographers after these initial, disappointing experiences with international studios, but that belongs to the realm of myth. By involving the Parisian master xylographer Beneworth⁴ for the final fourth part of the book on Frederick, both signalled that they continued to place great value in the highest international standard.

It is true, however, that Menzel, by insisting on including local engravers, who were to work following his direct instructions, had established a well-functioning network of master engravers in Berlin⁵ which, two years later, proved to be indispensable when the task was to establish the *Illustrirte Zeitung*, the first German-language weekly magazine founded by Weber in 1843.

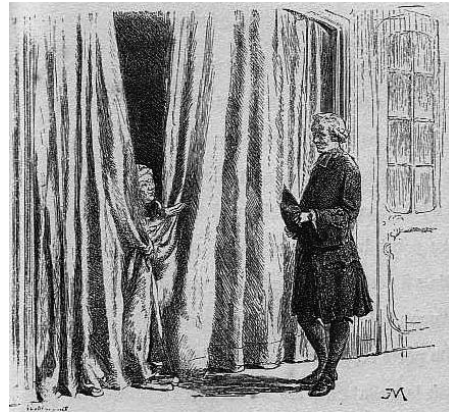
At first, the picture section largely relied on relief plates of their British model, the *Illustrated London News*, founded a year earlier, while the production of the local picture section fell back on the engraving art of expensively recruited British xylographers. It was the expansion of the studio of Eduard Kretschmar⁶, one of the senior engravers of Menzel's Frederick book, to a large enterprise employing close to 50 engravers, that ensured the basic xylographic supply for the *Illustrirte Zeitung* as an independent magazine.



The anecdotal, historical wood engravings in Menzel's Frederick book, the huge international success of which saved his publisher in a difficult phase from imminent financial ruin, are today much less popular than the radical retinal art found in his sketchbooks. In their liveliness and immediacy, in the way they capture snapshot-like moments, so sensitively reproduced by the engravers that the rector of the Königlische Akademie in Berlin brusquely rejected them as "scribbles", they mark nothing less than a revolution in the illustration trade and are far superior to the stiff, late-classicistic conception of illustration graphics widespread in the 1840s and 1850s.

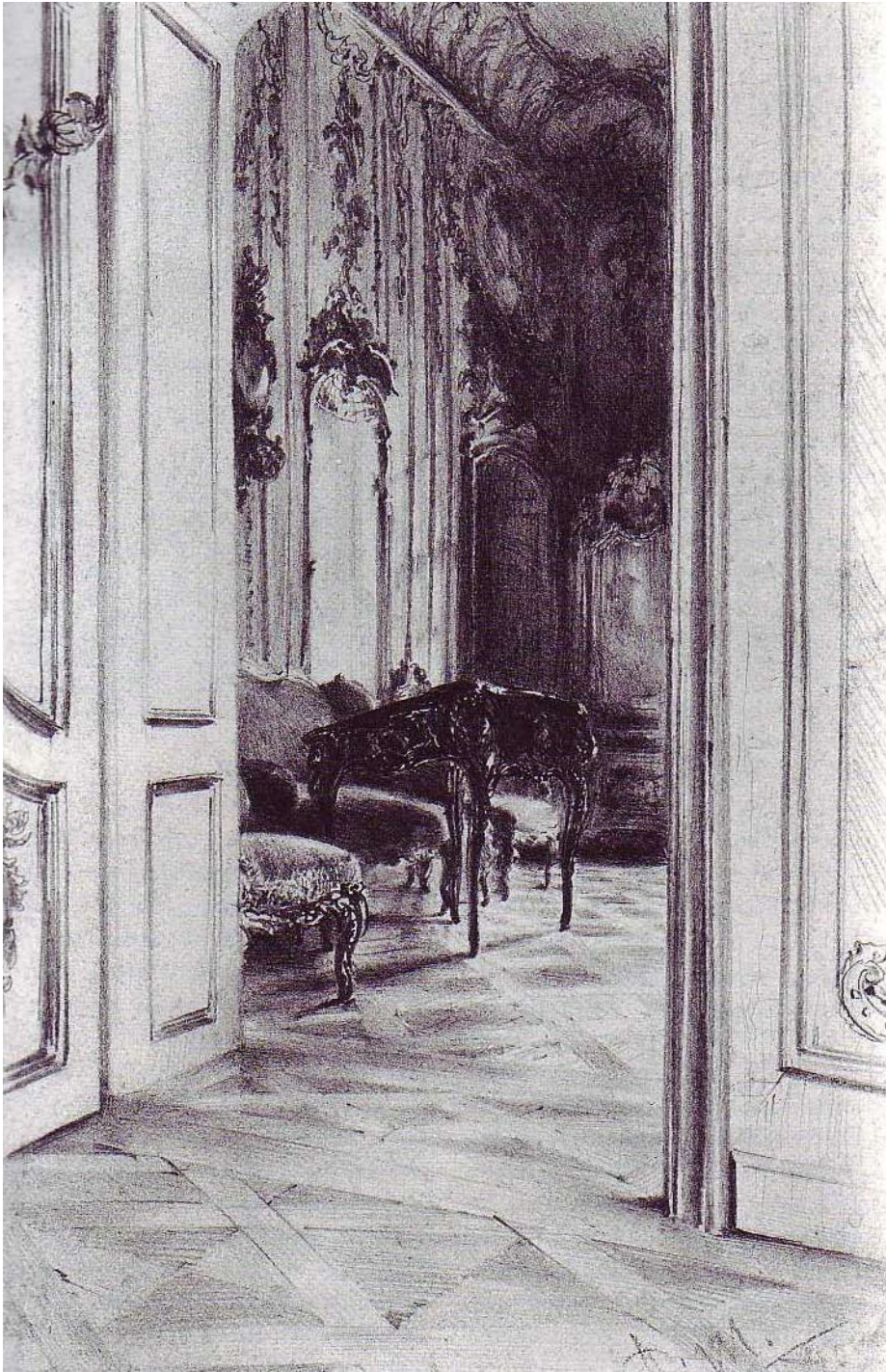


In “Pen Drawing and Pen Draughtsmen”⁷, a survey of 19th-century illustration art, the American author and draughtsman Joseph Pennell described the Frederick engravings as the pivotal driving force of the development of international illustration art. Pennell considered Ernest Meissonier’s illustrations for Cumer’s edition of “Paul et Virginie”, published shortly before Menzel began his work on the Frederick book, to be a direct inspiration. The interrelations between the illustration works of the two historical painters and their reciprocal influences – they met each other personally only in the 1860s, to then enter into a longstanding friendship – have not been further pursued by modern research on Menzel.



Menzel conducted a great amount of research for his book on Frederick in various libraries and archives over a number of years. In his depictions of battles, he never relied on pictures rendered by his predecessors. His efforts to achieve the highest level of authenticity included the meticulous reconstruction of events based on eye-witness accounts. In a preceding “historical proof”, Menzel mentioned not only a large number of diverse sources for his depictions, but also attached great importance to the fact that “the views of important localities ... have been almost completely captured according to nature”.

It was only during the course of this detailed historical research work for the Frederick book that Menzel commenced with his manic drawing activities on location, which he then expanded to an artistic strategy that was to form the basis of his entire work from then on. He never undertook his untiring reportage drawings unintentionally; he grasped them instead as a collection of visual fragments, particles meant to form great overviews, the encyclopaedic dimensions of which almost took on a Balzacian format. In no other literary work could Menzel find his artistic conception of a world fragmented into its individual components better mirrored than in Heinrich von Kleist’s tragicomedy, “Der zerbrochene Krug (The Broken Pitcher)”. In the Kleist jubilee year of 1877, Menzel was offered the opportunity to delve into the



Menzel, Studie im Potsdamer Stadtschloß, 1838

work of the writer he admired so much through an illustration commission. He was guided by the same meticulous, true-to-detail approach that had already informed his Frederick illustrations. Since, according to Kleist, the play was set in a Dutch village near Utrecht, Menzel at once travelled to Holland to search for locations. During his two-week stay, he filled several sketchbooks with fragments of drawings that later served as the basis for his illustrations.

The book includes 34 scenic depictions – the consistent execution of Menzel’s original idea of visualizing the play in a naturalistic setting - appearing as if they were a sequence of set pictures and stills of a film adaptation of Kleist’s play. The all but photorealistic resolution of the drawings and gouaches, due to the half-tone print, only goes to increase this impression.

As was the case with his grand first work, Menzel collaborated with the best xylographic studios of his time in this illustration work, which was to be his last: with Brendamour in Düsseldorf, Hecht & Walla in Munich, Kaeseberg in Leipzig, and Lütke and Albert Vogel in Berlin. The latter was the only local engraver who had worked on the Frederick engravings and was still in business.

When comparing the Frederick engravings with those of the “Pitcher”, the rapid development the wood engraving method had undergone in the past 37 years is striking. Its increased use as a reproduction medium for photographs had led to the development of ever more sophisticated techniques and contrivances that were able to reproduce finely graded tone ranges by means of more complex, fine structures. At first there were comb-like gravers employed manually; but as early as the 1830s, the first ruling machines were developed which became more and more specialized and refined. The pictorial effect of prints produced in this manner was subsumed by the wood engraver and poet William James Linton under the catchword “combed dreariness”, and Menzel also regretted the mechanisation of the engraving craft, but for “time-economical reasons” it had to be accepted whether one liked it or not.

However, Menzel deemed very congenial the new facsimile-like reproduction potentials of his works that resulted from the possibilities of photographic copying. The four illustrations are half-tone renderings of photographic reproductions of gouaches. 18 Initially, the attempt was made to photomechanically transfer his drawings as well. A method was employed that had been used in England since 1861 and several years later in continental Europe. The relief plates were coated with a light-sensitive layer, on which the photographed drawings were directly exposed and developed.

This method, which retained the characteristics of the original drawing, not only considerably increased the reputation and self-confidence of the reportage draughtsmen vis-à-vis the xylographers, it also boosted, within just a few years, a revolution in their style of drawing, in which Melton Prior, too, was very much involved.



Menzel / Kleist, Der zerbrochene Krug, Berlin 1877
Menzel, Skizze zum zerbrochene Krug, 1876 (Kupferstichkabinett Berlin)



Menzel, Der zerbrochene Krug, Berlin 1877 (Tonstich)



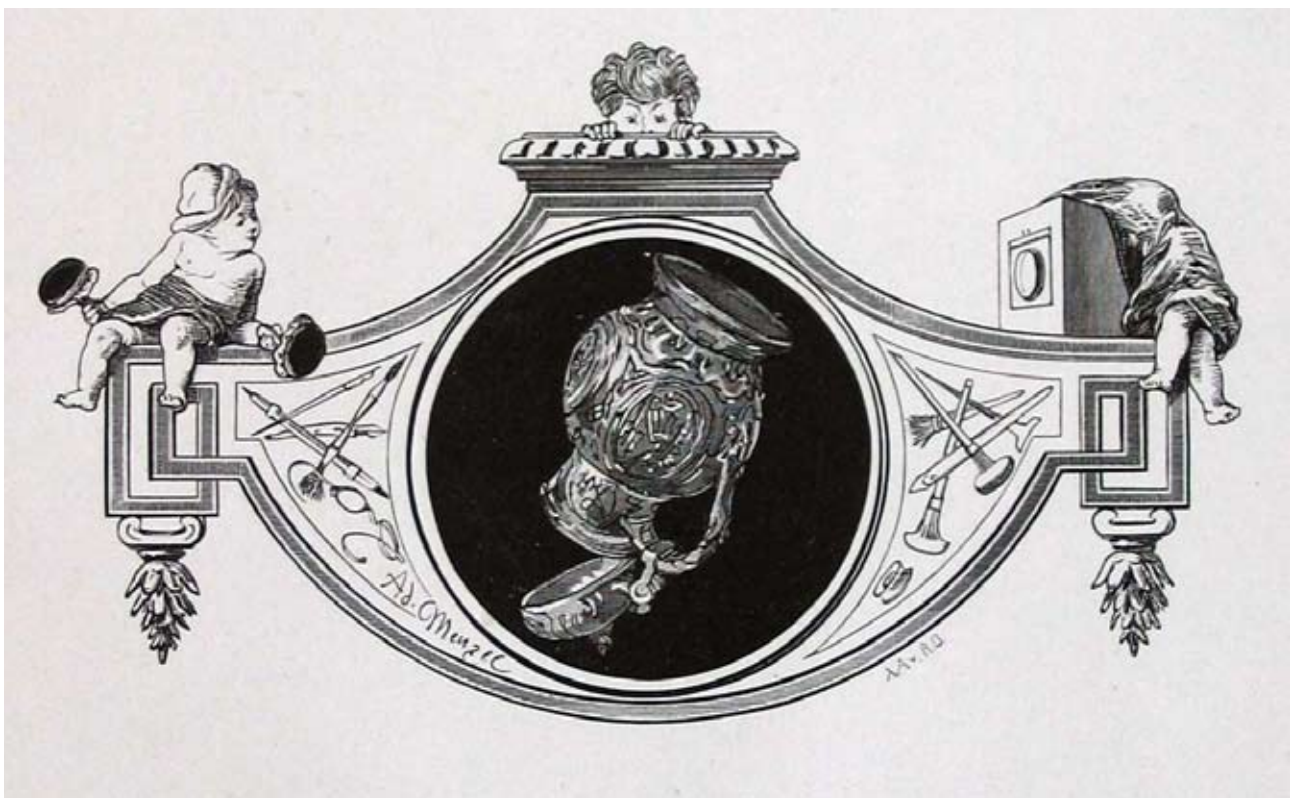
Menzel, however, was not satisfied with this type of transfer, since the drawings were reproduced only weakly on the relief plates. In addition, he saw that the emulsion layer had an aggressive effect on the surface of the wood. Hence, he fell back on drawing the motifs of the remaining illustrations directly with pencil or pen on the relief plates primed with white lead.

The pitcher illustrations mostly filled the entire page and could therefore no longer be engraved using one plate, as was the case with most of the much smaller Frederick graphics. Page-size copies for printing always consisted in a number of individual segments that were normally limited by the diameter of the used hardwood trunks to the size of 5 x 7 cm. After the drawing was applied, it was usually distributed based on the division of labour and in a “time-efficient” way among several engravers who then carried out the time-consuming preliminary work. Afterwards, they were put together again to be reworked and then printed.

Research on Menzel has occasionally underscored the importance of the first pages of the “The Broken Pitcher”. In the arabesque-like ornamental pages, Werner Hofmann sees the formulation of Menzel’s artistic program of an acentric historical picture that consists, like a montage, in a number of visual focal points.⁸

It is known that Kleist’s comedy was based on the cabbalistic myth of the loss of a cosmic unity through

Adam's fall and the resulting breaking of the so-called upper vessels. The emblem of the title page depicts the already falling pitcher mirrored in the pupil of an ornamental eye. For a moment, the paradisiacal state, in which the world is perceived free of self-knowledge and which is shaped by a unified process of creation, is still in place. But in the next instant, this paradisiacal unity disintegrates into the dispersion of an industrial production process defined by the division of labour: The left half of the eyeball is inscribed with the insignia of the draughtsman, flanked by a cherub holding ink dabbers. The separated left half contains the tools of the xylographer. The cherub above disappears under the cloak of a reproduction camera.



The next allegorical introductory page, in all its implicit ambiguity, confronts the viewer above all with the consequence of this separated creative process: The pitcher, which according to Kleist was embellished with a multitude of historical depictions, can be seen here standing damaged on its own shattered pieces. These fragments, which strangely possess regular, rectangular shapes, were identified by Menzel exegetes as “tiles”. Yet it is clear that these so-called tiles depicting the contour drawing of a disassembled portrait are segments of a relief plate; they amount to sixteen, the exact number necessary to form the 20 x 28 cm ornamental page.



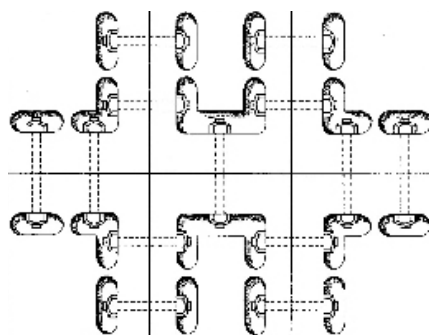
Pointing to the segmented relief plate, Menzel now refers to a somewhat different origin of his pictorial program than Hofmann presumes. He did not intend to make reference to the late-Baroque, allegorical, multi-level panel, but to the visual reportages in magazines and the industrial division of labour involved in producing their images and the resulting, novel pictorial formulations.

It would be absurd to view Menzel's artistic development, which culminated in the patchwork-like assembly of fragments captured in his sketchbooks with the aim of forming huge scenic paintings, outside the context of the visual experiments undertaken in the medium, the fundamentals of which he himself contributed to laying.

Around the mid-19th-century, the disparate pictorial process as well as the increasing abundance of pictorial source material had led to ever more daring and spectacular forms of montage in the editorial staffs of magazines, to multifocal disassociations of space and patchwork-like, split-screen compositions, often comprising the most heterogeneous image material: photographic copies, found objects, sketches by special artists, as well as gouaches and drawings by press illustrators.

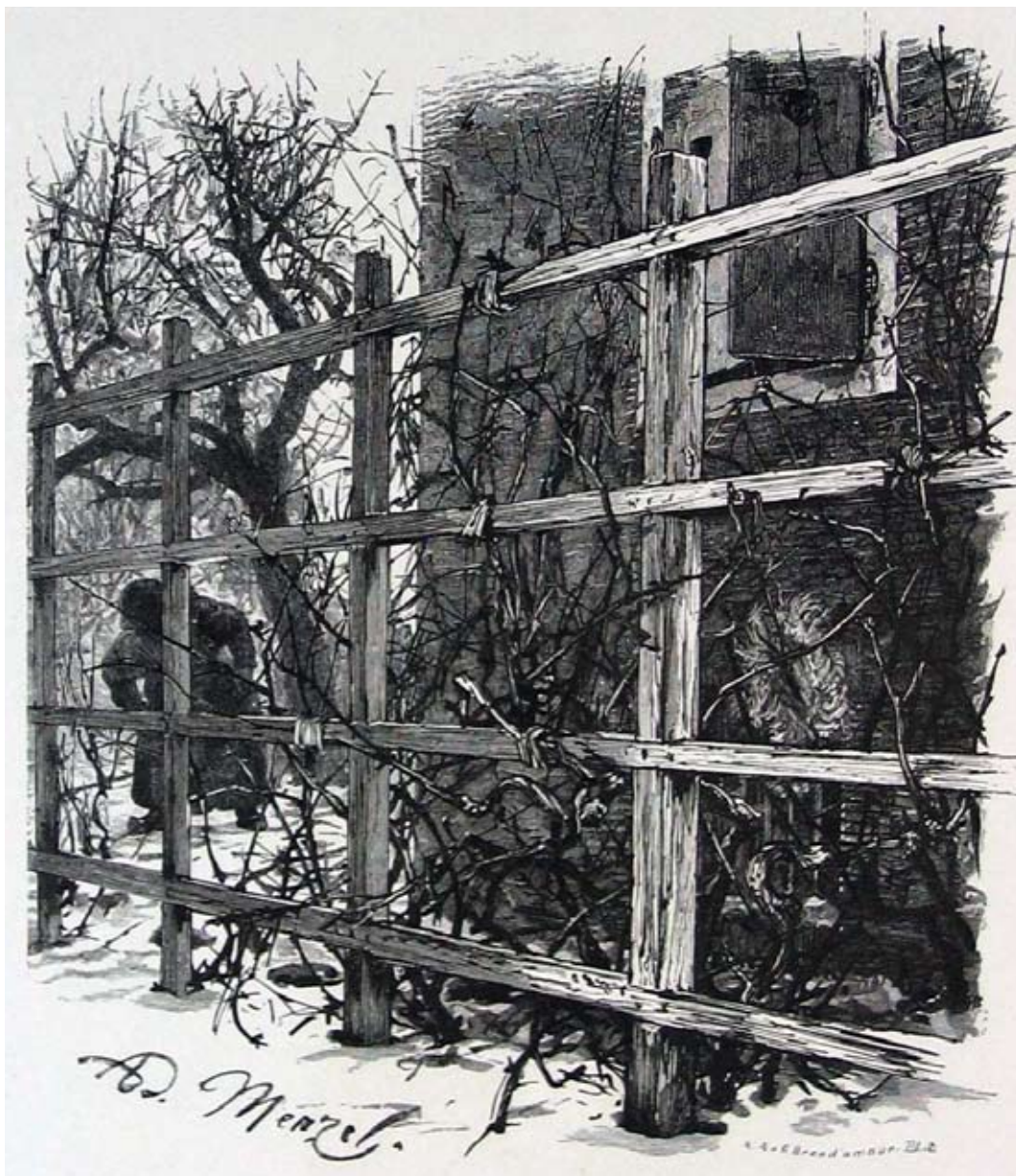
Menzel was not only sympathetic of these pre-filmic montage techniques, his own studio activities themselves reflected this radical division of labour – they were separated into the two basic figures of the illustrated press trade: the raging reporter and the assembling illustrator.

Menzel's own fragmentation is the theme of the emblem of smashed crockery. It is known to be his portrait rendered on the dispersed segments of the relief plate. And it is his own strained face looking back at Adam, village judge, from the shaving mirror in the first illustration. His offence and his fall at night would have remained undiscovered had he not left behind treasonable traces. His wig got caught in a row of vines, which Menzel lent the form of a 16-field grid in a very impressive illustration resembling a picture puzzle. (>next page)



In the case of luxuriously produced books and reproductions of engravings, like these Kleist illustrations, the printing workshops were able to invest time and effort to cover over their traces by carefully preparing and pasting together the relief-plate segments for the last processing steps, something which was not possible in the production processes of magazines, which were under extreme time pressure. Here, the hardwood plates were simply connected with brass bolts.

The attentive newspaper reader was thus not unaware of the concise structure in which Adam-Menzel's scalp had become entangled. He could often see it with his own eyes in the mostly large-format magazine illustrations in the form of traces revealing an image-making process subjected to the division of labour.



Menzel, Der zerbrochene Krug, Berlin 1877

¹ Wolfgang Weber : Johann Jakob Weber. Der Begründer der illustrierten Presse in Deutschland, Leipzig 2003

²The term special artist, used in the English press for reportage draughtsmen, was translated in the German illustrated press using neologisms such as Sonderzeichner, Spezialartist or Spezialzeichner .

³ known for their engravings in Vernet's "Histoire de l'Empereur Napoleon", Paris ,1839

⁴ known for his engravings in the two-volume edition of "Gil de Blas" , Paris , 1836

⁵ where the Königliche Akademie already in 1812 had started training xylographers by establishing a chair of wood and form cutting art

⁶ the only German wood engraving that in the critical view of W.J. Linton's history of xylography, "Masters of Wood-Engraving" (New Haven, 1889), endures

⁷London – New York , 1889

⁸Werner Hofmann , "Menzels Universalität", in: Adolph Menzel. Das Labyrinth der Wirklichkeit, Berlin 1996

same, "Menzels verschlüsseltes Manifest", in: Menzel – der Beobachter , Munich 1982