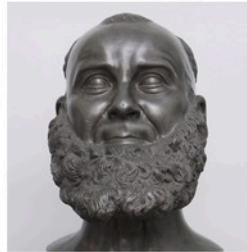


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Before Expressionism, Great Expressions



Messerschmidt's 'character heads,' clockwise from right: 'A Hypocrite and Slanderer' (1771-83), 'Capuchin' (ca. 1780), 'Childish Weeping' (1771-83), 'The Yawner' (1771-83), 'Just Rescued from Drowning' (1771-83) and 'The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing' (1777-81).



Neue Galerie New York (6)

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism To Expressionism

■ Neue Galerie
1048 Fifth Ave. (212) 628-6200
Through Jan. 10

BY ERIC GIBSON

One of the strangest yet most compelling figures in the history of art begins a star turn in Manhattan Thursday as the Neue Galerie opens "Franz Xaver Messerschmidt 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism."

Messerschmidt is best known for the roughly 50 "character heads" he sculpted at the end of his life, busts of men (in some cases himself) whose faces are squeezed into an extreme grimace in response to a psychological or physical state (grief, nausea). These works represent a sustained level of emotional in-

tensity rare in art and unheard of in portraiture. Seeing 19 together as we do in the Neue Galerie is as psychologically challenging as it is aesthetically pleasing.

Messerschmidt was born in 1736 in Weissensteig, southeast of Stuttgart, and moved to Munich with his family at age 10 after the death of his father. There he was apprenticed to his uncle, the court sculptor Johann Baptist Straub. In 1755 he enrolled in Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, establishing himself after graduation as a successful court portraitist. In 1765 he briefly visited Rome, returning to Vienna at the behest of the Empress Maria Therese to sculpt a commemorative portrait of the late Emperor Francis I.

The next five years saw Messerschmidt reach the top of his profession as a portraitist in Vienna, and his art change direction. It moved away from the late Baroque manner—heroically posed half-length figures

swathed in abundant drapery, ribbons and baubles—to the formal clarity and emotional restraint of the nascent Neoclassical style. Mimicking the ancient Romans, Messerschmidt's portraits depicted their subjects staring impassively ahead, head-and-shoulders only, without clothing or other adornments.

A small group of these at the beginning of the exhibition shows Messerschmidt's skill and provides us with a benchmark for what comes later. His marble likeness of the court physician Gerard van Swieten mixes gravitas with closely observed naturalism. The face conveys the sitter's maturity and professional stature, while the artist's mastery of technique is evident in his deft differentiation of forms and textures—for example the soft, jowly flesh of the mouth and cheeks as against the tightly curled yet flowing locks of hair.

Then, in 1771, came catastrophe. Suddenly unable to secure

commissions, deprived of a teaching post and forced to sell his possessions, Messerschmidt left Vienna. His sudden fall is thought to have been the result of a mental breakdown. He suffered paranoid delusions, believing he was besieged by evil spirits. After six peripatetic years he settled in Bratislava, there to see out the remainder of his days in near isolation. Reclusive, but hardly idle. He spent the last 13 years of his life working on his "character heads" (he had made his first one in 1770).

The word "character" suggests portraiture, but these aren't portraits in the conventional sense. Nor are they caricatures. Rather, they depict extreme states of being at their moment of maximum intensity. As much as anything else, the artist's animating impulse is a clinician's interest in the topography of a face at a particular instant and under a specific set of conditions.

Whatever Messerschmidt's

mental state, it had no impact on his descriptive powers. The same visual acuity and craft skill is on display here as in the bust of van Swieten. In each bust every muscle, fold of skin and bulging ligament is captured and orchestrated into a whole that can only be described as explosive.

Messerschmidt lived long before modernism's interest in probing man's inner impulses. So it's inappropriate to see them as expressionist works in the sense we understand the term today. They are at root, masks—everything is on the surface. Nonetheless, they speak in powerfully contemporary terms, and their existence suggests Messerschmidt found something wanting in the accepted portrait conventions of the day and turned to his character heads as a way of exploring the farther shores of human personality.

Messerschmidt is thought to have created his character heads to ward off the evil spirits he

thought were after him. Seeing them in a group, as one does in this show, makes you think he may have been onto something. Certainly they leave the ordinary mortal taken aback. To be in the presence of a crowd of sneering, scowling and laughing faces is to become suddenly aware that the normal relationship between art work and viewer has been overturned. You feel that you, rather than the objects on display, are the subject, the focus of attention. It's a sensation reminiscent of the work of the late Spanish contemporary artist Juan Muñoz, and that of the myriad installation artists since the 1960s, whose work has been about inducing a feeling of acute self-consciousness in the viewer. Something of an outsider in his own time, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt fits comfortably into ours.

Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Leisure & Arts features editor.