

Adolph Menzel, *Departure of King Wilhelm I for the Army on 31. July 1870 (1871)*

Abstract

That Adolph Menzel (1815–1905) used the pretext of an historical event to paint the crowds and facades of Berlin's preeminent boulevard, Unter den Linden, is suggested by the original title under which this painting was exhibited: *The Berlin Linden, Afternoon of 31. July 1870*. Having rushed back to Berlin from a summer visit to the mountains of Saxony, Menzel encountered this scene on the very day of his return. Along with countless others, he watched as King Wilhelm I proceeded down Unter den Linden in his carriage, on his way to the Potsdam train station to depart for the fighting front in France (the Franco-Prussian War had broken out only two weeks earlier).

The composition of the painting disappointed traditionalists of the historical genre of realism. Why had Menzel chosen to hide the queen's face behind a handkerchief and, for that matter, why was she crying when the crowd was so jubilant? Why were the blue and white flags bearing the Brandenburg eagle distinctly shapeless? Why did the bourgeois crowd so overwhelm the royal couple? Why did Menzel choose to paint the prelude to war, rather than one of the great battles or victory celebrations? The answers, as so often with Menzel, have to remain speculative, but more than a few compositional clues suggest his intention to depict bourgeois Berlin rather than royal and martial Potsdam. The placement of the king's carriage to the far left side of Unter den Linden relegates the royal couple to the literal margins of the scene. It is the crowd, not the couple, that occupies center stage. Moreover, deep in the background, at the termination of the avenue, one sees that Menzel has allowed Berlin's famous red-brick City Hall to tower over the indistinct Royal Palace that stands in front of it. By altering the actual relationship of the two buildings, and thereby giving city hall priority over the palace, Menzel may have been gesturing towards civic—rather than royal or martial—pride. (It should also be noted that other prestigious buildings along this stretch of Unter den Linden are conspicuously absent.) One other question arises: the German flags have been wrapped around their poles by a gust of wind: is the new Germany capable of flying yet? Less ambiguous is Menzel's incorporation of the Red Cross flag into his painting: as in most of his works—especially the sketches drawn on the Bohemian battlefields of July 1866—the victims of war were never far from his thoughts. To monarchist art critics like Friedrich Pecht, writing in the *Deutsches Kunstblatt* in 1881–82, even admiration for the painter's virtuosity could not disguise his disappointment that Menzel had offered insufficient patriotic resolution and “too much sentimental philistinism.” The novelist Theodore Fontane, in a letter to Menzel on July 2, 1871, came closer to the truth when he praised the artist for having “brought grandeur into everyday life.” (Theodor Fontane, *Briefe*. Otto Drude and Helmuth Nürnberger, eds., vol. 2, Munich, 1879, p. 382). The mistake of “so many ‘historians with the paintbrush,’” Fontane noted, was that they tried to make authority palpable for ordinary Germans by infusing it with concreteness. But Menzel's own conception of history—and how to depict it on the canvas—inverted the equation and privileged everyday life. Thus, the aging king's distinctly unheroic wave yields to the cumulative effect of the numerous and varied individuals, gestures, and fabrics that draw attention to themselves and take possession of the painting. (Note that only one figure is actually genuflecting to royalty; two others (at lower left) have turned their backs.) Thus, quite intentionally, bourgeois Berlin takes center stage even as Germany's dynastic, international, and military history reaches a turning point.

Source



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