

Adolph Menzel, *Procession in Hofgastein* (1880)

Abstract

That the “new German art” of the 1880s would reflect the political and cultural struggles of the day was inevitable. This painting by Adolph Menzel (1815–1905), also titled *Corpus Christi Procession at Hofgastein*, shows how the *Kulturkampf* played out on canvas. Menzel’s painting depicts both Catholic piety and liberal indifference to religion: thus, it gives two answers to the question, “Would a painting of a Catholic religious festival be considered a positive depiction of popular piety in the everyday lives of Germans living in Catholic areas of Germany, or would it be considered subversive at a time when Catholic clergy were experiencing the repression of the state and when Catholic localities were rallying in support of their church?”

When this painting was shown in Munich and Berlin in the 1880s and 1890s, critics marveled at Menzel’s ability to depict the ritual procession of Catholic clergy and laity in traditional dress through a picturesque village (not in Germany at all, as it happens, but in an Austrian resort). But the painting offers more than a straightforward rendering of its subject: it also comments on the deep social and confessional divisions in the Germany of Menzel’s day. It does so, in part, by creating a sense of disjuncture between the members of the procession and those who either watch or appear in proximity to it.

The lower-right third of the painting features a diverse group of burghers, who strike various poses in response to those passing by. The Munich art critic Friedrich Pecht described some of these figures: near the painting’s center is a mustachioed Austrian cavalier, who appears outwardly attentive but inwardly indifferent; behind him, leaning against a stone wall, is a young man who has turned his back on the procession to show either disinterest or disrespect (tellingly, Pecht alleged this figure to be either a Jewish journalist or an ambitious student training for a position in the civil service). In the lower right, Pecht identified a boastful and pretentious north-German businessman, accompanied by Viennese women, whom he considered “more experienced than beautiful.” The tension between the procession and the burghers is heightened when the viewer’s eye, traveling along the path’s gently rising diagonal, arrives at the right edge of the painting, where Menzel introduces a group of pious worshippers—including women, children, and the disabled—who kneel rather than parade to show their own reverence for the church.

Ultimately, Menzel refuses to provide any easy narrative resolution to this confused scene of dignity and chaos, and to the unfathomable sentiments that he has rendered in paint. The only sense of coherence is pictorial, achieved by way of the diagonal that helps organize the space of the painting. Indulging his painterly impulses, Menzel celebrates the glorious dance of sunlight and the bold colors of the festive costumes. Greater truths remain as open to interpretation as the indistinct mountains in the background.

Source



Source: Adolph Menzel, *Prozession in Hofgastein* [*Procession in Hofgastein*]. Oil on canvas (1880). Original: Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.
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