

Adolph Menzel, *The Iron-Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclops)* (1875)

Abstract

The need for self-representation among Germany's self-made entrepreneurs resulted in many commissions for depictions of factories, factory work, and factory owners' villas. For example, Albert Borsig commissioned a cycle of large canvases, *The History of a Locomotive*, from Paul Meyerheim to adorn his country house. This painting by Adolph Menzel (1815–1905)—his most famous—resulted from no such commission, however. It was originally purchased in stages (as work on the painting progressed) by the banker Adolph von Liebermann, who ran into financial difficulties soon after the finished work was delivered to him in early 1875. By October of the same year, Liebermann was forced to sell it to the director of the National Gallery, Max Jordan (receiving 30,000 Thaler for a work that had cost him 11,000).

A number of features found in traditional compositions and in Menzel's other large canvases can be seen here: note, for example, the painting's triptych-like structure. With the painting divided roughly into thirds, Menzel was able to depict various stages in the men's workday. The middle "panel" shows numerous men toiling with glowing, molten metal; to the left, various other workmen wash up at the end of their shift; to the right, some others eat bread that has been brought to them by a young girl. Menzel's characteristic ordering of space is achieved by the strong diagonal that runs from the girl in the lower-right corner, through the fire and huge flywheel, and backward into the deepest recesses of the factory. Various elements reinforce this trajectory, including the play of light, as well as the curve of the worker's arm (in the approximate center of the canvas), which echoes and underscores the shape of the flywheel.

Although this painting conveys a true-to-life impression of smoke, sweat, heat, and backbreaking labor, it was first conceived in Menzel's mind: first, as a way to progress beyond the genre of historical realism that had produced, for example, so many depictions of Frederick the Great and the coronation of King Wilhelm I (1861), and, second, to satisfy Menzel's own curiosity about how to best depict the new Germany, where the rise of manufacturing had introduced both huge factory works and complex industrial organization, as well as an ever-growing demand for the grinding human labor required to keep these machines and systems running. To research his subject, Menzel traveled to the state-owned Königshütte Rail Works in his native province of Silesia in the late summer of 1872. He visited a foundry noted both for its sophisticated machinery and, just as important, for its emerging social tensions (note the figure of the factory inspector, who is profiled against the glow of a furnace in the painting's middle ground [left]). Menzel read the engineering literature of the day, sketched unfamiliar tools, and studied the motions of workers who moved in harmony with giant machines. He also visited the Borsig Metalworks in the Berlin suburb of Moabit.

What, then, do we observe here? In 1879, Menzel explained to Max Jordan that he had depicted the production of a length of rail through its many stages: from a white-hot "puddle ball" (left), through a series of rollers (center), and then on to the three figures at the right who wait to receive it, whereupon they will begin to shape it into a rail. The scale of the actual Königshütte enterprise depicted in Menzel's painting was nothing short of remarkable. Three thousand workers were employed in seven principal furnaces, 71 puddling furnaces, and 33 smelting furnaces. Together with 4 Bessemer converters, these units produced 55,000 tons of raw iron, 43,000 tons of iron bars and rails, 750 tons of raw zinc, and 10,000 tons of steel for the railways in a typical year.

Source



Source: Adolph Menzel, *Das Eisenwalzwerk (Moderne Cyclopen)* [*The Iron-Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclops)*]. Painting (1872–75). Original: Nationalgalerie Berlin.
bpk-Bildagentur, image number 00006890. For rights inquiries, please contact Art Resource at requests@artres.com (North America) or bpk-Bildagentur at kontakt@bpk-bildagentur.de (for all other countries).

© bpk/ Nationalgalerie/ Klaus Göken

Recommended Citation: Adolph Menzel, *The Iron-Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclops)* (1875), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:image-1312>> [June 30, 2025].