

Adolph Menzel, *Supper at the Ball* (1878)

Abstract

On the surface, both Anton von Werner (1843–1915) and Adolph Menzel (1815–1905) look like adoring painters of court life and royal pomp. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that Menzel's motivations and talents were far more complex than those of his friend. When viewing Menzel's *Supper at the Ball* (1878), it is important to realize that during his lengthy career he completed only one great work commissioned by the Prussian court: the giant canvas commemorating the 1861 coronation of King Wilhelm I in Königsberg. Of course, by the 1870s, Menzel was *persona grata* at court and had already received numerous royal, academic, and artistic honors. But by this point in his career (recall that his first masterpiece, *Balcony Room*, dates from 1845), he was living and seeking inspiration in the private domain. Largely self-taught, he associated with no school and preferred not to surround himself with disciples.

Menzel's fascination with the juxtaposition of glamour and chaos, convention and formlessness provides a context for his interest in Berlin's [great court balls](#), which he attended with the utmost enthusiasm. These lively events doubled as opportunities for him to prepare sketches for later paintings—at times, Menzel could be seen perched atop a table with pad and pencil in hand, or busily sketching drawings on the back of invitations. (He was known to keep preparatory works of this nature in a special red folder in a locker in his studio.) Thus, the chaos we see here—one overflowing with both complexity and specificity—is best described as a studied chaos. Signs of social awkwardness and confusion abound in both the right half of the painting, which is populated almost exclusively by women, and the left half, which is crowded with men. Everywhere, the guests strive to achieve a precarious (and seemingly effortless) balance, carrying on conversations that might lead to social advancement, while struggling to avoid the potential disaster represented by spilled food and dropped utensils. The small-scale nature of these individual social interactions contrasts with the size and density of the larger crowd, where everyone seems to be getting in someone else's way.

The precise moment that Menzel chose to depict allows him to capture both the fleetingness and the crush of the crowd. The royal court has already withdrawn to its reserved rooms; second refreshments are being served for the guests at the buffet; and soon the interval between dances will be broken. Meanwhile, the *petite polonaise* of individuals continues. But unlike Werner, who in painting such scenes took pains to ensure that certain figures were recognizable as contemporary notables, Menzel presents over 50 highly interesting and unique, yet ultimately unidentifiable faces. Additionally, whereas Werner was obsessed with architectural exactitude (for example, in the first version of [The Proclamation of the German Empire \(January 18, 1871\)](#) (1877), he strove to reproduce the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles in its tiniest detail), the series of rooms shown here corresponds to none found in Berlin's palace (or anywhere but Menzel's imagination). And while Werner's more documentary realism—again, best appreciated in his *Proclamation*—freezes a moment in time, Menzel's freer style conveys energy and motion. His figures turn, twist, nod, and bend over; the clink of forks on plates and the rustle of dresses can almost be heard; and the effect of movement is such that the gentleman at the far right appears to be heading straight out of the picture frame, the assumption being that he is carrying a plate and a glass of champagne to an unseen companion. Dissolution in order and rank, convention set topsy-turvy, the mingling of banality and prestige: these are the effects achieved by Menzel in this painting. But not only here.

Consider that *Supper at the Ball*, already begun in 1876, was painted soon after Menzel had completed [The Iron-Rolling Mill](#) (1875), which depicted the other end of the social spectrum. The opposite social worlds depicted in these two paintings are brought together through Menzel's use of a similar pictorial

strategy: both paintings represent complex scenes expressed in complex compositions; both invite the viewer's gaze to traverse the canvas—first from side to side and then, aided by diagonals, from foreground to background; both depict social division and practical community-building, suggesting threat and tribute at the same time. In contrast to Werner's studied, traditional realism, however, Menzel's style is fueled by a personal and artistic curiosity that offers a segue—by way of ambiguity—into a more modern era.

The art historian Peter Paret has suggested that German modernism comes into sharper focus against the background of Menzel's art – its contradictions, unfollowed trajectories, and occasional obsession with detail. In making this argument, Paret notes that it would be wrong to consign Menzel to the rank of just another “history painter,” as so many glittering uniforms and ball gowns might first seem to suggest. Just as modernism after 1890 left literal realism and conventional narrative behind, Menzel's brushstrokes “possess great suggestive power” and “his narrative expresses a penetrating intelligence.” (Peter Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 9.) Little wonder, then, that artists of the stature of Max Liebermann and the Frenchman Edgar Degas—the latter of whom painted a smaller version of Menzel's *Supper* out of pure admiration—recognized a compelling affinity between Menzel's art and their own. The realist novelist [Theodore Fontane](#) also understood that Menzel's independence allowed him to comment on Bismarckian society with both empathy and critical distance—sincerity barbed with irony and even a little satire. *Supper at the Ball*, then, helps explain why Menzel exceeded Werner in allowing forward-looking individualism to emerge from Bismarckian conformity. As Paret put it with reference to Menzel, the royal court always felt a “silent unease with the unpredictable and uncontrollable pictures of an artist whom it was perhaps safer to honor than to employ. [. . .] What is lacking [in *Supper at the Ball*] is any hint that by their presence in the palace these happy few partake of, let alone express, a higher state of grace flowing from the crown's majesty and plenitude of power.” (Peter Paret, *Art as History: Episodes in the Culture and Politics of Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 172.)

Source



Source: Adolph Menzel, *Das Ballsouper* [*Supper at the Ball*]. Oil painting (1878). Original: Alte Nationalgalerie Berlin.

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