

Axel Christoph Gampp on Michel Yonan, Messerschmidt's Character Heads: Maddening Sculpture and the Writing of Art History

Review of: Michel Yonan, *Messerschmidt's Character Heads: Maddening Sculpture and the Writing of Art History*, New York and London: Routledge 2018. Hbk, 194 pages, 35 B/W Illus. ISBN-10: 1138213438, ISBN-13: 978-1138213432, £105 ebook from £35.99

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Michel Yonan seems to be a very ambitious man writing a very ambitious book. As he explains in the foreword, his intention is to produce not another book about Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736 – 1783) but to present the book of books. There is almost a metaphysical point of view in it. Hovering above the others, the author wishes to demonstrate how art history and art critics have dealt with the Austrian artist. To put in his own words: 'The central theme of this book is the narratives we use in order to assign meaning to works of art or to the structures of art-historical interpretation. [...] I wonder if it would be possible to create a different kind of story about these objects.' Thus Yonan would be at the same time the *arbiter elegantiarum* and his book would be the *interpretatio interpretationum*. This is a very promising point of departure. Yonan begins with the visit of Friedrich Nicolai to the artist's studio in 1781. Nicolai gives a rather strange record of this meeting, declaring the artist to be insane. Thus he has infected all further writings on Messerschmidt. Art-historical reflections were influenced by Nicolai's judgement. In particular, an art history originating under the auspices of Freud was particularly interested in mentally disturbed but creative minds and gave birth to the writings of Ernst Kris. Yonan has to deal with this background and there lurks the danger! Since he understandably wishes to save his hero from unjustified accusations, he is obliged to enter the lowliness of daily art-historical work in order to prove that by placing Messerschmidt in the context of his time, matters appear in quite a different light. The context includes on the one hand Franz Anton Mesmer (1734 – 1815) and on the other Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742 – 1799). The first was a well-known scientist in Vienna, acquainted with Messerschmidt and particularly famous for his theory of magnetism. The fame of Mesmer and the way his various forms of 'scientific' progress were observed are seen by Yonan as a parallel to the end of Messerschmidt's academic career in 1774 when he was not appointed as professor: 'In both instances, issues of trust and honesty (integrity) are paramount, and in both, it might be seen that that the illogical (aspect) has won over the rational.' (p. 87). The conclusion would be that the treatment of Mesmer is somehow mirrored in several of Messerschmidt's Character Heads, proving that the artist turned 'science into ethics' (p. 94).

The other person who plays an important role is Lichtenberg. He appears in a double role together with William Hogarth based on a written source of 1793 where the link between Messerschmidt and Hogarth has already been established. The relationship is due to a certain 'Englishness' in Messerschmidt's sense of humour and opens up the whole field of nationalism in the late 18th century, which Yonan discusses in a very sophisticated chapter that also includes some remarks on satire in general and Messerschmidt's in particular. All these points deal with aspects of 'Produktionsästhetik' (aesthetics of production). Yonan finally comes to the conclusion that aspects of 'Rezeptionstechnik' (aspects of reception) may be more important since Messerschmidt may emphasise the relationship between a work of

art and the beholder. Thus the reader is given the whole field that may be linked with the strange but remarkable Austrian sculptor. To cover this wide field, as Yonan does, there is always a risk that in the details things can be criticised. That should not be done in this case. Rather the broad approach should be appraised. If there is a detail to be mentioned, it may be that Yonan uses the 'titles' given *a posteriori* in the Character Heads at the first exhibition of these in 1793. From Messerschmidt we do not know any of these. It seems rather that there was *a posteriori* an attempt to attribute some kind of *historia* to works of art whose initial intention was more to stimulate a (physical) reaction than to tell a story. The ambitious aim to hover above former contributions dealing with the artist had inevitably to give room in some way to different interpretations. In conclusion, it is not certain whether the writer of this review has obtained all the newness from Yonan's results. However, it may well be that a problem arises which has been described by the above-mentioned Lichtenberg when he once declared: 'If an ape looks in a book, no angel will look out.' That may well be the case here, too.



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