Mesmerizing Muses: The Life of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, his Character Heads, and his Influences on Contemporary Artists

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Karlyn C. Olvido

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Committee members:

Name: Nancy Scott

Name: Charles McClendon

Name: Peter Kalb
Mesmerizing Muses:
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INTRODUCTION

The human facial expression is a powerful tool. It establishes statements for first impressions, offers clues to inner thoughts and feelings, and has the potential to set the emotional tone of an entire artwork. From approximately 1770 to 1783, one artist stretched the limits of human physiognomy with his busts featuring contorted human faces in Vienna, Austria and later in Preßburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia). During a time when flamboyant Baroque and Rococo trends of the eighteenth century European art scene intersected with the growing favor of simplified Neoclassical works, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, who was rumored to be psychologically troubled, carved and molded animated “Character Head” sculptures onto lifeless alabaster and lead-tin alloy. Such daring and aesthetically rebellious work at the time of their creation have conjured questions about Messerschmidt’s mental state, as well as ridicule from a public that had a taste for both intricate baroque and emergent classical revival in the visual arts. Today, however, these fantastic Heads fascinate art historians, are treasured by private collectors, are bolstered upon pedestals in art museums, and serve as the roots of inspiration for contemporary artists of various media around the world. As my thesis will demonstrate, the work of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt opens many venues for art historical research and ideas for artists.

My thesis topic stemmed from my time as a 2011 summer curatorial intern for the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. My curiosity in the Character Heads, or “Kopfstücke” (head pieces) as Messerschmidt called them, actually began during a preliminary interview for this internship when one of my advisors informed me of an upcoming exhibition featuring a supposedly mad eighteenth century artist
who created eccentric sculptures that are related to modernity and contemporary art. Right away, I began to formulate questions and pursued some research on this intriguing artist and his unusual sculptures. I must admit that the whimsicality of the Character Heads and their humorous titles, not the scholarly viewpoints of them, persuaded me to learn more about Messerschmidt’s work. Like others who will be mentioned in the course of my thesis, I was astonished that sculptures with such modern qualities were created in the eighteenth century.

Since they were aware of my interest in Messerschmidt from the beginning, my advisors at the Getty gladly allowed me to feed my curiosity with the main project of assisting the then Senior Curator, Antonia Boström, with an upcoming exhibition entitled *Messerschmidt and Modernity*. This show, which ran from July 2012 to October 2012, dealt with connecting the Character Heads to art of the twenty-first century using the themes of expression, physiognomy and psychoanalysis. Artists with a suggested theme in common with the Character Heads did not necessarily derive creativity from Messerschmidt’s oeuvre. Research for this exhibition contemplated analogies between the eccentricity of the Character Heads and modernity in order to compliment the Getty’s 2008 acquisition of Messerschmidt’s *The Vexed Man*.

Although I ended my internship with answers to my initial questions about Messerschmidt, I left with even more inquiries. What are the origins of Messerschmidt’s Character Head designs? What causes the Character Heads to be unsettling for many viewers? What specific aspects of the Character Heads do contemporary artists use in their own works? Thus, my thesis differs from *Messerschmidt and Modernity* in that I deal with issues that were not highlighted in this exhibition. This includes more theories about aesthetic origins of the Character Heads and Messerschmidt’s studies in Rome, the evolution of the Character Heads’ reception history, and direct influences of the Character Heads on contemporary artists. I do,
however, retain discussions about physiognomy, psychoanalysis and expression, as these subjects are pertinent to sections about reception history and contemporary art.

Research for my thesis began in the Getty Research Institute the summer following my internship. My idea to conduct research in Vienna, Austria appeared when I quickly realized that information about Messerschmidt is significantly more abundant in Europe than in the United States. I knew that if I wanted to find answers to my questions, I had to use materials that were only available in Vienna, the city where Messerschmidt spent the majority of his life. In Fall 2012, I studied abroad to use resources at the Österreichische Bibliothek, books at the University of Vienna, and archives at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, where Messerschmidt studied.

I needed to venture to Europe in order to observe Character Heads in person, as the majority of them are in European museums. Since part of my job at the Getty was to keep an object checklist and write letters to prospective loaners, I was aware of the locations of many of Messerschmidt’s art. With the help of my Getty advisor, Antonia, I was able to contact Georg Lechner, Curator of Baroque Art at the Belvedere Palace, which owns the largest collection of Character Heads today. Georg generously shared photographs of Messerschmidt’s work housed in the Belvedere, as well as his knowledge about Messerschmidt’s art from the beginning of his career to the Character Heads. He also recommended I meet with Alexandra Hanzl, Assistant Curator of the Princely Collections at Palais Liechtenstein. Despite the collection being closed to the public, Alexandra allowed me to study two of Messerschmidt’s early works for my visual analysis and gave me rare photos to include in my thesis. My internship at the Wien Museum proved to be another tremendous opportunity to study Character Heads with resources in the curatorial library.
My interview with Tony Bevan in London was another opportunity that was made possible with the help of Antonia. In November 2012, I had the pleasure of visiting him at his studio in London. We conversed about how he became interested in the Character Heads, his opinions on them, and his reasons for finding them inspiring. I also studied his works on paper in progress. This unique opportunity to interview an artist for my thesis allowed for unusual detail in the section about Tony Bevan discussed in my third chapter about contemporary artists.

From my research at the Getty and abroad, I learned that analysis along with physiognomy and psychoanalysis, as well as the public’s growing interest in Expressionism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were essential for a more academic analysis on the Heads. Ernst Kris introduced the first attempt at discerning the Character Heads from a psychoanalytical perspective. The desire to understand the complexity of human facial anatomy brought in part by Professor Albert Ilg of the University of Vienna led the influential Zuckerkandl family to begin collecting Character Heads. Moreover, the educational promotion of Camillo Sitte and Josef Urban was monumental in staging the Character Heads for accession in top museum collections, including the famous set at the Belvedere.

Since the 1980s, Messerschmidt’s sculptures before 1770 have been part of major exhibitions about Baroque art, while his Character Heads were used to support exhibitions of contemporary artists. It was not until 2002 that these busts were featured in a spotlight of their own for the comprehensive exhibition Franz Xaver Messerschmidt in the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere. This exhibition focused mainly on the Character Heads for the first time since the public’s rediscovered interest in these busts during the 1907 Hagenbund exhibition. The first American dedication to the Character Heads was through the 2010 exhibition Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism in New York’s Neue Galerie.
The Getty’s subsequent 2012 exhibition was another to honor the Austrian artist, as well as to celebrate the Getty’s 2008 acquisition of The Vexed Man.

Along with the concept of creating pure expression in art, the physiognomic approaches and psychoanalytical implications of Messerschmidt’s Character Heads have had profound impacts on contemporary artists around the world. Today, artists in Great Britain, Austria, Germany, China and the United States have adopted the distorted features of the Heads into their own art. Some artists, including Tony Bevan of London and Florentina Pakosta of Vienna, have even done extensive research on Messerschmidt’s biography, and used their findings as muses for their own art.

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt touched on very different genres of art in his short lifetime: Baroque, Neoclassicism, and what seem to be elements of Expressionism in the eyes of the contemporary viewer. This brilliant artist was a mystery to society during his time, and continues to be an enigma to scholars today. His Character Heads, which is akin to art of the early twentieth century, were deemed too extreme for an eighteenth century audience that was perhaps not ready to accept this distorted style in an intellectual manner. Nonetheless, the Character Heads, although far from pleasing the baroque or neoclassical preferences of Messerschmidt’s peers, intrigued twentieth century scholars of art history and psychoanalysis. Moreover, they inspired the creation of new art in the twenty-first century by individuals who realize that the sculptures’ outward bizarre appearances belie the work of a genius and perhaps a troubled man.

Although my interest in the Character Heads was born from a ludicrous observation similar to that seen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I later learned that there is much more to the Character Heads beyond their unique appearances. I sought to prove that there are
qualities of the Character Heads that are worthy of academic merit. These are not merely deformed portraits, and Messerschmidt’s personal history and stylistic evolution is much more complex than he, theoretically, reaching the breaking point of insanity. I now see the Character Heads and their creator in a different light, one that shares more similarities with the enlightening and praising opinions of art historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The German journalist Friedrich Nicolai once described Messerschmidt as a “strange” and “great” man. As an artist whose work touches on a multitude of scholarly subjects and contains an intensity that lives on through the ingenuity of contemporary art, Messerschmidt certainly fits Nicolai’s claim of greatness. Messerschmidt’s astonishing Character Heads, as well as his extreme stylistic transformation attest to his importance by offering insights to analyze significant changes in artistic preferences in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries through various art historical themes.
CHAPTER 1
The Personal and Artistic Transformation of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt

The Man presents himself with a contorted facial expression atop an outstretched neck, which is on the verge of tearing. His eyes, furrowed brow, pointed nose, and mouth seem to gravitate towards the center of his face to form a scrunched look. The corners of the Man’s mouth droop down and approach the floor, causing him to have a deep frown. The natural marbling of alabaster accentuates the extensive wrinkles on his face, especially the creases that frame his eyes. The combination of his exaggerated arched brow, languishing mouth, and his sealed eyes emanate an aggregation of emotions, including distress, vexation, and frustration. A biography of the sculptor who infused such a vivacious expression onto inanimate stone, which was later named The Vexed Man (fig. 1.1) by scholars, is necessary to understand how his oeuvre came to exemplify characteristics of Expressionism in a Baroque and Neoclassical art world.

Born on February 6, 1736 in the modest village of Wiesensteig in Southern Germany, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt was the fourth child of his mother Johanna’s seven children.1 His father was Johann Georg Messerschmidt, a tanner in the village.2 Following the death of Messerschmidt’s father in 1746, Johanna moved the family to Munich to live with her brother, a sculptor by the name of Johann Baptist Straub.3 Due to Straub’s status as a sculptor for the court of Munich, Messerschmidt had access to one of the most prominent artist workshops in Southern Germany. During his childhood, the young Swabian acquired skills in creating baroque and

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rococo style sculptures in wood as an apprentice for his uncle in Munich. In the course of his six years there, he trained with many famed sculptors, such as Ignaz Günther and Roman Anton Boos. In 1752, he worked with his other uncle Filip Jakob Straub, a practicing sculptor in Graz, Austria. Both maternal uncles offered Messerschmidt insights to the latest trends in sculptural techniques and design.

Messerschmidt decided to continue his art studies in Vienna, despite his sound training amidst some of the most admired artists in Germany and Austria at the time. The reasons for his move are unknown. It is possible that he sought to learn from court sculptors of the Habsburg Empire, Jakob Christoph Schletterer and Balthasar Ferdinand Moll. From 1755 to 1760, Messerschmidt attended the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna (Akademie der bildenden Künste). As a result of his talent and early training in sculpture offered by his maternal uncles, Messerschmidt impressed his teachers at the Academy and excelled as a top student. He was a pupil of Jakob Schletterer, a sculptor who mainly worked with bronze, and probably encouraged Messerschmidt to start using this medium. Furthermore, the young artist became the favorite sculptor of Martin Van Meytens, who was the President of the Academy and a Dutch painter. As one of his advisors, Van Meytens arranged Messerschmidt’s first exhibition as a “stucco cutter” in the Imperial Armory in Vienna in approximately 1760.

It is possible that Van Meytens’ paintings influenced Messerschmidt’s budding style. A comparison between works by the two artists shows that Van Meytens’ paintings probably made an impression on the formal qualities of Messerschmidt’s early sculptures at the Academy. The

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Empress Maria Theresa sits in a regal pose in Van Meyten’s *Portrait of Queen Maria Theresa* (fig. 1.2), which is still displayed in the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna today. The manifestation of her extravagant wealth is featured as prominently as the empress herself. The florid drapery envelops the subject entirely, and jewels crown her head and frame her face. She dominates the canvas, not only with her clothing, but with her body language, as well. Her direct gaze at the viewer and smirk confront the audience with confidence that exudes a royal demeanor.

Drenched in gold and exhibited with a similar shoulder, head, and facial pose as Van Meyten’s image of Empress Maria Theresa, Messerschmidt’s portrayal of the empress is equally luxurious (fig. 1.3). In comparison to Van Meyten’s painting, she is wrapped in a cocoon of fabric with deep folds and intricate jewels that indicate her wealth. Messerschmidt’s sculpture is comparable to Van Meyten’s painting because of his implementation of baroque style that is evident in the decorations of the empress’s clothes and jewels. A major similarity between Van Meyten’s painting and Messerschmidt’s sculpture is the effective depiction of the Empress’s noble composure through her facial expression. Both artists translate the empress’s personality into their art by arming her with straight posture and a direct gaze at the viewer. These elements characterize the empress as having an august aura that can be observed in both works.

While at the Academy, Messerschmidt became acquainted with and was inspired by the work of Balthasar-Ferdinand Moll, an admired Baroque sculptor in Vienna. The influence of Moll on Messerschmidt is seen in a comparison between Moll’s *Faith, Hope and Charity* (fig. 1.4) and Messerschmidt’s *Maria Immaculata* (fig. 1.5). Moll’s figures are enveloped in flowing drapery, a baroque feature. Each figure exhibits gracefully placed hands and their feet are lifted above the ground. The placement of their limbs paired with fluttering clothing adorns the saints with the illusion that they are floating.

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Messerschmidt’s full-body sculpture of the Virgin surrounded by angels, which was made approximately twenty-six years after Moll completed his sculpted allegory of Faith, Hope, and Charity, was created in a similar fashion. Messerschmidt inherited this sculpture project for the Duchess Maria Theresia Felicitas of Savoy-Carignan following the death of the original artist, Franz Kohl. The Duchess trusted Messerschmidt with the completion of this sculpture for her Savoyard Convent on Johannisgasse in Vienna because he was one of the few artists who knew how to skillfully handle lead-tin alloy. Messerschmidt’s sculpture of the praying Virgin is depicted according to the vision of the Apocalypse. She stands atop a globe during her ascent to heaven as she steps on the symbol of evil, the serpent that lured Adam and Eve to sin.

Although Messerschmidt adds winged angels to emphasize the floating feature of his subject, he seems to mimic the dainty hands and rustling drapery that are also seen in Moll’s sculpture to suggest lightness. The angels of Maria Immaculata also have feet that are seemingly raised without effort, just as the saints in Moll’s work have their feet floating lightly in the air. Both sculptures exhibit a paradox of weight. Moll and Messerschmidt present subjects using heavy sculpting materials, stained walnut and lead-tin alloy respectively, and manage to reincarnate them into seemingly weightless pieces of art. It is likely that Messerschmidt adopted Moll’s method of strategically placing his subjects’ elongated limbs and clothing to give the illusion of levity. As seen in Maria Immaculata, the early sculptures of Messerschmidt had elongated bodies, which caused the heads to seem smaller. This feature is also noticeable in Moll’s sculpture, and allows the artist’s talent to shine through details in the placement of the figures’ bodies rather than their facial expressions.

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10 Information about Maria Immaculata by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt obtained from The Museum System (TMS) data page of the Liechtenstein Museum with help from Mag. Alexandra Hanzl, accessed on September 12, 2012.

11 Mag. Alexandra Hanzl (director and curator of the Princely Collections, Palais Liechtenstein), interview by Karlyn Olvido, September 12, 2012.
Messerschmidt’s talents in sculpture earned him his popularity among Viennese royals. From 1760 to 1769, Messerschmidt received commissions from members of the Habsburg Empire, including a request for a full-length portrait for Empress Maria Theresa when she became Queen of Hungary. As previously mentioned, Messerschmidt sculpted a gilded bust of the empress, a request from Field Marshal Joseph Wenceslas I. These busts demonstrate that Messerschmidt assimilated and implemented the late Baroque lessons of his Academy mentors. For instance, Moll’s influence on Messerschmidt’s style can be seen again when comparing Field Marshall Josef Wenzel Prince of Liechtenstein (fig. 1.6) by Moll to the aforementioned bronze and gilded Empress Maria Theresa (fig. 1.3) by Messerschmidt. Both sculptures are adorned with florid design and detailed jewels to denote the high social status of both individuals. Moreover, the two artists show emphasized depictions of facial imperfections, including wrinkles on the forehead, rough skin, bags under the eyes, and wrinkles around the mouth. The pupils of both subjects are also clearly marked. Additionally, Moll included unusually distorted faces of men with mustaches on the sleeves of the Field Marshall. These men can be seen with exaggerated expressions with their furrowed brows and large drooping eyes, which give them the appearance of suffering. Although the use of intense expressions is not visible on Messerschmidt’s sculpture of the empress, it is possible that Messerschmidt recalled both of Moll’s methods of including facial flaws and contorted expressions in his later, more Expressionist-like portraits.

Messerschmidt’s talent of infusing life and personality into the stationary nature of sculpture accentuated his personal style and fame. This talent is exhibited in the full-body sculptures entitled Maria Theresa as Queen of Hungary (fig. 1.7) and Kaiser Franz I. Stephan of

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Lothringen (fig. 1.8), both of which were created between 1764 and 1766, when Messerschmidt was in his early thirties. These bronze sculptures were originally covered in white paint, and some residue of the original color can be seen as specks on the statues.\(^\text{13}\) Both sculptures encapsulate the signature characters of each individual. The jubilant Queen appears to be in a dance position. The depiction of her clothing suggests movement, as evidenced by the fabric that clings to the front of her body with the shape of her knee slightly defined through her dress as the back of her dress remains in a flow. She is decorated with embroidered fabric and jewels dangling form her hair and corset. She looks off into the distance with a smile on her face. All in all, Messerschmidt’s portrayal of Maria Theresa is one that gives viewers the impression that this Empress was jovial and enjoyed flaunting her wealth. Furthermore, her lighthearted demeanor in this sculpture seems to be an antithesis to her stately portrait bust that Messerschmidt produced five years earlier. The dancing Maria Theresa Queen of Hungary exemplifies how Messerschmidt used movement of the body to display another facet of his subject’s personality.\(^\text{14}\)

On the other hand, Kaiser Franz I stands sternly in an almost complete characteristic contrast to the statue of his wife. He has fewer adornments than the Queen. In fact, major evidence of his affluence is seen on the embroidered patterns of his cloak, but he is free of jewels. Additionally, the straight lines of the king’s clothing give the impression that he stands stationary in comparison to the dancing empress. Furthermore, his facial expression, with serious eyes and a straight mouth, conveys the personality of someone who is austere.

Messerschmidt’s attention to detail and ability to capture specific and unique personalities in his

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\(^\text{13}\) Dr. Georg Lechner (curator of Collection of Baroque Art, Belvedere Palace), interview by Karlyn Olvido, August 30, 2012.

\(^\text{14}\) Scholars have speculated that Empress Maria Theresa is depicted as dancing in the sculpture Maria Theresa Queen of Hungary. Georg Lechner (curator of Collection of Baroque Art, Belvedere Palace), interview by Karlyn Olvido, August 30, 2012.
work led to his achievement as Court Sculptor of the Habsburgs. The strategic placement of
each delicate facial feature, every piece of fabric, and the amount of decoration on each of his
projects contributed to his flourishing popularity.

By 1765, Messerschmidt earned enough revenue from commissions to travel to Italy in
order to study sculpture under his own motivation without subsidies or encouragement from
Austrian royalty or the Academy, and he was one of the first Austrian sculptors to do so.15 Ten
years before Messerschmidt began his journey, Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote
“Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture,” in which he outlined
the aesthetic superiority of “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” a description of art that
criticized the Baroque concept of using numerous ornaments.16 Winckelmann encouraged artists
to imitate the artistic practices and philosophies of the Greeks, who focused on the perfection and
beauty of their subjects’ bodies. Neoclassicism, which Winckelmann promoted, employed a
spotlight on physical features, as opposed to exhibiting wealth with elaborate accessories.
Winckelmann’s essay is a possible factor that encouraged Messerschmidt to depart for Italy, and
ease away from baroque style.

In his quest to Italy, Messerschmidt joined numerous others in absorbing Italian art and
ideas. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Italy became a special destination for travelers.
This phenomenon, called the Grand Tour, defined tourists in Italy as an academy of independent
wandering travelers. The Grand Tour was devoted to “leisure spent in enthusiastic learning,” as
well as the benefits of associating oneself to members of other cultures.17 Considering that

16 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and
University Press, 2009), 30.
17 Cesare de Seta, “Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century,” in Grand Tour, ed. Andrew
traveling was typically reserved for aristocrats who could afford this activity, the fact that Messerschmidt raised enough revenue on his own for his journey demonstrates his success as a sculptor.

After he made a brief visit to his hometown in Germany, Messerschmidt headed to Rome to study and copy antique sculptures.\(^\text{18}\) Due to the lack of primary documents, details of his studies in Rome remain a mystery. The story of Messerschmidt’s time there can, instead, be drawn from a few articles in Viennese newspapers, highlighting comparisons between his sculptures and works that he may have seen there, and studying the stories of others who journeyed to Rome during the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

Winckelmann’s *The History of Ancient Art*, which was available in 1764, would have been a fruitful guide for Messerschmidt.\(^\text{19}\) In chapter four of Part One of his publication, Winckelmann briefly lends focus to a discussion of classical portrait busts. Although he vilifies Roman art, Winckelmann describes these portraits as beautiful “for their merit lies solely on their workmanship.”\(^\text{20}\) One such acclaimed portrait worthy of mention by Winckelmann is of the Emperor Caracalla (fig. 1.9) is, as Winckelmann notes, particularly striking with its vexed expression. This sculpture was a part of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s collection in the Palazzo Farnese while Messerschmidt was in Rome. It has defined and extensive wrinkles on the forehead, is tight-lipped and stares down with glowering eyes as if it is criticizing the viewer. The combination of these features arms the portrait with a profound presence and a ferocious personality of its own. The French scholar Charles de Brosses explained that viewers do not

\(^{19}\) In his book, Winckelmann discusses the importance of proportion, a topic that is significant to Messerschmidt. It can be inferred that Messerschmidt referred to this section of Winckelmann’s texts when studying the proportions of his sitters. Discussion of the proportion of the face in particular can be found in chapter four of Part One of *The History of Ancient Art*, pp. 207, 210-12.
look at this sculpture; rather, the sculpture looks at them.\textsuperscript{21} These facial features symbolize the personality of the subject, a merciless emperor who was ruthless enough to murder his own brother.

It is highly probable that Messerschmidt, like his peers, attempted to see as many collections of classical sculpture as he could in order to refine his neoclassical style. Messerschmidt would have had access to The Capitoline Museums, as they had been open to the public since 1734, thirty-one years before his arrival in Rome.\textsuperscript{22} Further support of Messerschmidt’s visit to the Capitoline is evidenced by an article in the May 6, 1767 issue of the \textit{Wienerisches Diarium} reporting that he was acquainted with Filippo della Valle,\textsuperscript{23} a sculptor famous for designing the Papal Tomb of Innocenzo XII in the Vatican and the allegorical figures of Health and Abundance on the Trevi Fountain.\textsuperscript{24} He was also the former president of the Accademia di San Luca, which held award ceremonies at the Campidoglio.\textsuperscript{25} Although there remains no explicit evidence that Messerschmidt visited the Accademia di San Luca,\textsuperscript{26} his familiarity with Filippo della Valle suggests the possibility that he spent time at the Musei Capitolini, in addition to this museum’s reputation as the site for visiting artists to study the classics. Nonetheless, even without his acquaintance with Della Valle, it is difficult to believe

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Maria Pötzl-Malikova, “Herkunft und Jugendzeit,” in \textit{Franz Xaver Messerschmidt} (Vienna: Jugend und Volk), 30.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} “DELLA VALLE, Filippo,” http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/filippo-della-valle_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Paul, “Introduction,” 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Pötzl-Malikova, “Herkunft und Jugendzeit,” 30.
\end{itemize}
that Messerschmidt did not visit the galleries of the Musei Capitolini, given the reputation of the museum alone.

Surely, Messerschmidt would have been exposed to the bust of Caracalla, along with works displaying similar animated facial expressions in the galleries of the Capitoline.\textsuperscript{27} The Stanza dei Filosofi and Stanza degli Imperatori, in particular, housed numerous busts of philosophers and Roman emperors respectively. The immensely detailed classical sculptures that surrounded Messerschmidt were not only probable causes of his pursuit towards a neoclassical style, but could have contributed to the aesthetics of the exaggerated expressions in his later sculptures as well.

Since there exists virtually no comments from Messerschmidt about his time in Rome, his experience and impressions of the city can be inferred by studying accounts from other visitors. It was common practice for travelers during the Grand Tour to record details of their time in Italy in a diary.\textsuperscript{28} The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, for instance, recorded his thoughts about Rome in detail when he traveled there from 1786 to 1788. In his \textit{Italian Journey}, he mentions that he relied on \textit{A History of Ancient Art} as a guide for understanding and interpreting Roman and Greek sculptures.\textsuperscript{29} He claimed to be so entranced by “the Apollo Belvedere, some colossal heads, and the Sistine Chapel” that he saw “almost nothing anymore but them.”\textsuperscript{30} Goethe’s writings are insights to the awe-inspiring atmosphere that Messerschmidt lived in. As an artist who was seeking to learn about classical art, Messerschmidt’s reception of

\textsuperscript{27} Numerous versions of the Caracalla were popular in the eighteenth century. The Albani Collection had four portraits of the emperor, which were eventually acquired by the Capitoline Museum. See Haskell and Penny, \textit{Taste and the Antique}, 172.

\textsuperscript{28} De Seta, “Grand Tour,” 15.

\textsuperscript{29} Goethe used \textit{A History of Ancient Art} by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, translated in Italian by archeologist Carlo Fea (1783/84).

Roman and Greek masterpieces were probably filled with even more immense enthusiasm than Goethe’s reaction to them.

Despite the lack of written accounts by Messerschmidt concerning his education in Rome, a brief anecdote about his method of sculpting is provided in the article of the German journalist Friedrich Nicolai entitled, “Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781,” the only known primary document with details about the artist’s creative process.\(^{31}\) The journalist described Messerschmidt’s ability to carve directly into wood. Rival sculptors observed in awe as “Hercules emerged from the misshapen wood.”\(^{32}\) This quote, which was annotated from an interview between Nicolai and Messerschmidt towards the end of his career, attests to Messerschmidt’s supreme artistic skill with his ability to blindly carve into materials. Such talent prompted one Spanish sculptor to accuse Messerschmidt of using the power of an evil spirit to sculpt. Messerschmidt responded by striking the spectator for insulting his honor. Nicolai’s provided account of Messerschmidt’s strange behavior is one example of the artist’s bizarre manners, which became progressively antisocial and detrimental when he returned to Vienna.

Messerschmidt’s style changed dramatically when he reappeared in Vienna later in 1765.\(^{33}\) The artist who was once distinguished by his ostentatious design was now noted for his more subdued portraits that focused on the human figure, rather than materialistic symbols of wealth. Merely four years after he completed *Maria Immaculata*, Messerschmidt sculpted his vision of the miracle by the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament in his *Elijah Increases the Oil*

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\(^{31}\) Friedrich Nicolai, “Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781,” in *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism*, ed. Maria Pötzl-Malikova et al. (New York: Neue Galerie, 2010), exhibition catalog, 208. Nicolai visited Messerschmidt towards the end of his career in his studio in Preßburg, where information about his artistic process was gathered in an interview, the transcript of which can be found in the aforementioned article.

\(^{32}\) Boström, “Trip to Rome and First Signs of a New Style,” 4.

\(^{33}\) Boström, “Return to Vienna,” 6.
of the Widow (fig. 1.10). Similar to Maria Immaculata, this piece was commissioned by the Duchess of Savoy-Carignan, and was originally a courtyard fountain for the Savoyard Abbey in Vienna.\textsuperscript{34} Classical influences are apparent in the Widow with sculptures of Roman vases and naked putti, as well as the exhibition of thinner clothing on the woman to showcase the artist’s skills of depicting contrapposto. In comparison to the Virgin in Maria Immaculata, the feminine body shape of the Widow is much more apparent as she bends over slightly to pour oil from a pot. Furthermore, variety of textures of curly hair and thin garments on the Widow are much more distinguishable in this fountain than in Maria Immaculata. Messerschmidt’s earlier sculpture of the Virgin surrounded by angels is quite monotone in texture; the distinction in texture between clouds and fabric is unclear in his previous work for the Duchess.

Messerschmidt continued to significantly reduce the amount of decorations on his sculptures following his training in Rome. In contrast to his gilded bust of Empress Maria Theresa, his sculpture of Joseph Wenceslas, Prince of Liechtenstein (fig. 1.11), is a marked evolution towards Neoclassicism. Messerschmidt’s art became stripped of cascading, dramatic drapery and shining jewels that characterized his baroque flair. Instead, they have been replaced by stoic designs reminiscent of early Republican and Imperial Roman sculpture, which he studied while he was in Italy. Details of the subject’s face, such as pores and several wrinkles, have been eliminated as well. While the bust of the Empress contains clear, and perhaps exorbitant, details of facial flaws, the bust of the Prince of Liechtenstein has smooth skin, virtually no wrinkles, and he is even missing detailed pupils, an aesthetic decision that was

\textsuperscript{34} Information about Elijah Increases the Oil of the Widow by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt obtained from The Museum System (TMS) data page of the Liechtenstein Museum with help from Mag. Alexandra Hanzl, accessed on September 12, 2012.
common in neoclassical sculpture. Just as artists of the neoclassical period placed emphasis on the physical features of subjects, rather than emblems of prosperity, Messerschmidt paid further attention to his subject’s facial features. Additionally, his new sculptural style followed another characterization of Republican and early Imperial sculpture by eliminating the shoulders and clothing of his subjects, so the focus is purely on the head of the person being represented.

Although Messerschmidt’s newly simplified style differed profoundly from the baroque fashion that led to his fame, he remained as laudable, if not increasingly commendable, as he was before he left Vienna for Rome. Admirers of the sculptor described his work as “honest, present, and timeless” because they showcased the personality of the individuals, rather than the objects that they owned. In 1769, he entered one of his neoclassical-style busts, *Franz von Scheyb* (fig. 1.12), as a presentation piece to the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and it yielded positive reactions.

The progression of the public’s preferences towards the admiration of Republican Roman styles contributed to the welcome of Messerschmidt’s artistic evolution. The mid-eighteenth century audience admired the French portrait sculptor of the 1760s, Jean-Antoine Houdon, as the acclaim of his neoclassical portrait busts was thriving throughout Europe. Like Messerschmidt and other artists of the mid-1700s, Houdon copied famous marble sculptures as a scholar of antiquity in Rome. He was a recipient of the Prix de Rome 1761, and it has been suggested

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35 For more information about the beginning of incising the eyes of ancient Roman portraiture during the Hadrianic period, see Diana E. Kleiner, “The Portraiture of Hadrian,” in Roman Sculpture (New Haven: Yale University, 1992), 238.
that he and Messerschmidt were affiliated. Due to their former training in baroque sculpture, both Houdon and Messerschmidt incorporated some traces of High Baroque into their neoclassical sculptures when they did depict articles of clothing, thus creating the unusual and esteemed mélange of opposite styles.

A visual study between Messerschmidt and Houdon is used for the purpose of demonstrating how preferences in style were transforming. It is possible that Messerschmidt did make the acquaintance of others from France and England, and this comparison between Messerschmidt’s neoclassical sculpture and that of his colleague in Rome is one example. Messerschmidt was probably aware of works similar to Houdon’s terracotta Portrait Bust of Denis Diderot (fig. 1.13), which was entered in the 1771 Paris Salon. This terracotta version of the French philosopher can be compared to Messerschmidt’s tin alloy portrait of the Prince of Liechtenstein (fig. 1.11), which was dated in 1772, a year after the Paris debut of Diderot. Similar to Houdon’s style, Messerschmidt focuses on his subject’s facial expression without the distraction of frivolous clothing or jewelry. Both artists managed to include illusions of the subtle ripples of skin, producing mimicries of human flesh. Additionally, Houdon and Messerschmidt recreated nuances of their subjects’ facial expressions, such as the slightly raised corners of the mouth, imperfect bumps on their noses, and wrinkles on the corners of their eyes. These minute details result in the realistic depiction, rather than an exaggeration, of each individual’s face. However, Messerschmidt took a step further into neoclassicism, as seen when comparing his depictions of only his subject’s face and neck to Houdon’s baroque decision to include shoulders and detailed pupils in his portraits.

When Messerschmidt returned from Rome, his patrons expanded to the elite of the Enlightenment. His new neoclassical form is apparent in his portrait bust of Franz Anton Mesmer (fig. 1.14), a German scientist who led controversial medical practices and experiments in Vienna that later led to his exile in Paris. Similar to the formal qualities that are found in Joseph Wenceslas and Franz von Scheyb, the head and neck of Mesmer rest on a base with an inscription of the sitter’s name. Ornaments are absent on this work and the base of his neck tapers to a point a few inches below the suprasternal notch. This is a notable change from his baroque sculptures, in which Messerschmidt added clothing and jewels on his subjects’ shoulders. In addition to the sculpted portrait bust of the scientist, he designed a fountain for his Viennese garden at his home, where he probably lived during the 1760s.

Messerschmidt’s favorable artistic skills in neoclassicism caused him to be next in line to inherit the position of Professor of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. In 1774, the senior professor of sculpture was deceased. However, according to Academy records, Messerschmidt was deemed too mentally unstable to claim the position. Since the right of professor appointment was an imperial decision, Count Kaunitz, the prime minister of Vienna, addressed a letter to Empress Maria Theresa with an explanation of the Academy’s decision to dismiss Messerschmidt as a potential professor at the Academy: “The most important objection … is the fact that for three years, he has shown signs of some confusion … Although that confusion in his head has meanwhile subsided, permitting him to work as he had done before, it occasionally is still evident in a not perfectly healthy imagination … in that he believes all other professors and directors to be his enemies.”

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41 Boström, “Return to Vienna,” 9.
well enough to work, but was a threat to the safety of students and faculty at the Academy. He went on to say that Messerschmidt had peculiar tendencies, and proposed that other sculptors replace him as contenders for Professor of Sculpture, including Johann Hagenauer, Jacob Müller, and Friedrich Wilhelm Bayer.\(^{43}\)

In his 1774 synopsis of reasons to reject Messerschmidt from becoming a member of the Academy faculty, Count Kaunitz reveals, “for three years he has shown signs of confusion.” This statement indicates that the beginning of the artist’s mental breakdown began in approximately 1771. During this time, Messerschmidt commenced a personal project that involved the rapid production of life-sized portrait busts, including *The Vexed Man* that was described earlier. From approximately 1771 until his death in 1783, Messerschmidt created sixty-nine sculptures with extreme facial expressions, which were later referred to by scholars as Character Heads, in either a lead-tin alloy or alabaster. His aptitude to sculpt nearly seventy intricate portraits in about thirteen years is a statement to his capabilities, but is not surprising when considering his evident talent seen earlier during the discussion of his education in Rome.\(^{44}\)

Messerschmidt decided to leave Vienna because he felt his rejection of the professor position was an injustice. In 1774, he offered his house with the address Ungargasse 5 in the third district of Vienna for sale in the local newspaper *Wienerisches Diarium*.\(^{45}\) In 1775, he spent some time in his hometown of Wiesensteig before heading to his final residency in Preßburg, the capitol of Hungary at the time, in 1777.\(^{46}\) He spent the last six years of his life in a house along the Danube referred to as “Zum Hirschen” located in the Zuckermandel


\(^{44}\) See chapter 1, p. 17.


neighborhood of Preßburg, where he continued to create Heads. Although Messerschmidt was rejected from a job with a generous salary in Vienna, he profited from the economic advancements of his new location through commissions from prestigious individuals who requested low-relief sculptures on medallions (fig. 1.15). The list of noble clients included the governor of Preßburg, who admired Messerschmidt’s work and assigned him with the project of sculpting a portrait in 1780. The mayor even attempted to acquire a group of Character Heads from the artist. Messerschmidt did not accept the offer, however, because the Heads were not intended for public viewing.

Occasionally, curious visitors sought to learn more about the mysterious sculptor of distorted Heads in Preßburg. Many followers of Messerschmidt’s art assumed that he suffered from a mental illness because he purposefully created disfigured portraits. Several artists wondered about the mysterious whereabouts of the famous court sculptor from Vienna, and thus visited Messerschmidt’s studio in Preßburg. One visitor, a journalist called Friedrich Nicolai was introduced earlier in the chapter to discuss Messerschmidt’s creative process. He published an article entitled, “Description of a Journey Through Germany and Switzerland in the year 1781.” Nicolai describes Messerschmidt as a very intelligent and eccentric man who loved nothing more than making art. According to the article, the anxious, imaginative artist almost always preferred to sit while he sculpted, and insisted on living in isolation on the outskirts of Preßburg. One of Nicolai’s theories to explain Messerschmidt’s odd artistic practice was his tendency to sit as he produced Heads without frequent breaks, which caused a disruption in his blood circulation. This, in turn, led to abnormalities in the blood flow to his brain.

49 See chapter 1, p. 20.
Nicolai also mentioned that Messerschmidt earnestly believed that evil spirits were haunting him, particularly the “Spirit of Proportion.” Messerschmidt insisted that the Spirit of Proportion was envious of him because he nearly perfected human proportions in his realistic sculptures. As a result of his jealousy, the Spirit would cause pain throughout the artist’s body. In order to ward off this jealous Spirit, Messerschmidt created his Character Heads to scare the demon away. Moreover, as reported by Nicolai, Messerschmidt thought that sections of a person’s head corresponded to sections of the rest of their body. In following his theory, Messerschmidt would harshly pinch the flesh of his ribcage in order to produce a foul grimace to copy, in either alabaster or a lead-tin alloy, from a mirror. The fearsome grimaces that he produced and copied in this sculptures were used as tools to deter the haunting imaginary spirits.

The debate as to whether or not Messerschmidt was mentally troubled lives on among contemporary art historians. Despite reports that he had gone mad because of his reasons and methods for producing Character Heads, the fact that Messerschmidt continued to have successful commissions is proof that he was not completely insane. He remained fully aware of the classical art lessons that he received in Rome, as proven by low-relief portraits on medallions, which were ordered by various patrons concurrently with the artist’s personal project of making Heads. Approximately one year before his death, Messerschmidt composed the portrait bust of Martin Georg Kovachich (fig. 1.16), a Hungarian historian who had connections to Friedrich Nicolai. This portrait was made in 1782, and features the serene face of Kovachich in a neoclassical style with glimpses of baroque fashion clothing on his chest. This bust is evidence that until the last years of his life, Messerschmidt’s supposed mental breakdown did not impede his retention of exemplary skill. It is additional material to disprove the common

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50 Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” 320.
51 Dr. Georg Lechner (curator of Collection of Baroque Art, Belvedere Palace), interview by Karlyn Olvido, August 30, 2012.
misconception that Messerschmidt was entirely mentally unstable because a certain level of reason and creativity is needed to produce such realistic works.

Messerschmidt continued to make Character Heads until he died of pneumonia in Preßburg on August 19, 1783 at the age of forty-five.\textsuperscript{52} It was not until 1793, ten years after Messerschmidt’s death, that the surviving sixty-four Character Heads were found, and forty-nine of them were exhibited in the Vienna Bürgerspital (The Citizen’s Hospital).\textsuperscript{53} A cook in the Hospital named Strantz purchased the Heads from the artist’s niece, daughter of Johann Adam Messerschmidt, and curated the exhibition.\textsuperscript{54} An anonymous author wrote a catalogue to accompany this show entitled, “The Curious Life-Story of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt,” in which the Heads were assigned numbers.\textsuperscript{55} The forty-nine sculptures that were members of the exhibition are outlined in a lithograph by Mathia Rudolph Toma and are labeled in correspondence to the numbers noted in the catalogue of the first exhibition.\textsuperscript{56}

Messerschmidt never appended names to the Character Heads, nor did he coin the term “Character Head.” Yet, scholars who organized the 1793 exhibition of the Heads titled the busts based on their own interpretations of Messerschmidt’s work for identification purposes. Since the 1793 Bürgerspital exhibition, the busts have boasted names such as \textit{The Vexed Man} (fig. 1.1), \textit{A Hypochondriac} (fig. 1.17), \textit{Afflicted with Constipation} (fig. 1.18), and \textit{The Beak Heads} (fig.

\begin{thebibliography}{56}
\bibitem{Höckerl2017} Höckerl, “The ‘Hogarth of Sculpture,’” 23.
\bibitem{Numbers2017} Numbers on the Character Heads given by those who discovered them indicate that Messerschmidt originally made at least sixty-nine portrait busts. Five busts seemed to have been destroyed or damaged by the artist, leaving sixty-four for posterity. Fifty-five Character Heads survive today. The artist destroyed some, as mentioned, while others were lost. See James Cuno, “Forward,” in \textit{Messerschmidt and Modernity} (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), vii.
\bibitem{Boström2017} Boström, “Death and Exhibition,” 22.
\bibitem{Toma1839} Mathias Rudolph Toma, lithograph of Character Heads by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1839, in Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, inventory number WH 1680E.
\end{thebibliography}
2.22 and 2.23). These titles do not reflect the expressions that Messerschmidt originally intended to display. Instead, these adopted names are later viewers’ projected interpretations of the sculptures. The titles conceived by later viewers have proven themselves to be a hindrance in scholarly interpretations of the facial features because they imply false interpretations of the Heads and distract from Messerschmidt’s possible intention of using them as physiognomic studies. Furthermore, some titles have possibly contributed to ridicule directed towards both the busts and the artist, which has lasted for centuries.

Messerschmidt explored radically different artistic styles during his lifetime. His training in baroque sculpture at an extremely young age thanks to family connections with renowned sculptors lifted him to fame as a court sculptor for the Habsburgs. He continued to experience applause for his works after absorbing lessons in Rome, even though his style transformed dramatically following his studies of classical sculptures. He produced neoclassical busts not only for Austrian elite, but for Enlightenment scholars, as well. Unfortunate circumstances in his personal life plummeted Messerschmidt’s notoriety. His desolation after being rejected as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts drove him to leave Vienna, the city he called home for nearly twenty years. The last years of his life in isolation were spent producing unusually contorted faces with exaggerated grimaces, causing observers to believe that he was insane. Speculations and rumors about the artist circulated. Consequently, accusations of his madness swiftly replaced earlier acclaim for his skills. When focus shifted to his personal struggles, the public’s respect for Messerschmidt as a talented sculptor shifted as profoundly as his style transformed.
Franz Xaver Messerschmidt sculpted his Character Heads solely for himself. Ten years after his death, however, his personal creations became gifts for the public in a 1793 exhibition. The Character Heads were, quite understandably, shocking to audiences who admired neoclassical works that were greatly popular at the time of the Character Heads’ discovery and display. The early witnesses of Messerschmidt’s Heads mocked their bizarre appearances, and did not see them as serious scholarly subjects. In the late eighteenth century, for example, papier-mâché replicas of the Character Heads were suitable only for freak shows and game booths at the Vienna Prater, a popular amusement park in the city.\(^{57}\) One observer of the Heads at an 1867 exhibition claimed, “Messerschmidt, that past master of the aesthetic of the ugly, can be termed the ‘Hogarth of Sculpture’ due to their likeness to caricature.\(^{58}\)

Although the theme of strikingly aberrant faces unites them, the Character Heads exhibit a range in variation of style, as revealed in a close analysis. These sculptures may be divided into five types according to formal qualities. They are discussed here not in terms of chronology, or in any other order in particular, since the specific dates of each sculpture are unknown. The first group conforms to more natural human expressions, rather than extreme facial contortions. This group contains portraits with cropped hair and includes works such as The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing and Quiet Peaceful Sleep, in which the artist depicts the subject smiling and sleeping respectively without obvious indications of discomfort. The second set has

\(^{57}\) Antonia Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” in *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism*, ed. Maria Pötzl-Malikova et al. (New York: Neue Galerie, 2010), exhibition catalog, 54.

\(^{58}\) Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” 43.
busts with more extreme expressions that, as this chapter will later discuss, mimic the animalistic quality that Messerschmidt claimed he was aiming for. The Heads of this group have varying hairstyles, shifting from extremely short to long and straight, as his hair was not the main focal point of these works, and therefore the style did not matter. *The Vexed Man* is a member of this group. The oval bald heads of *A Hypochondriac, A Powerful Man*, and other bald busts compose the group of oval bald heads. In this group, Messerschmidt has deleted the hairstyle factor completely in order to focus solely on expression. *A Hypocrite and a Slanderer* and *Afflicted with Constipation* are a few examples of the group of busts with short necks. In addition to having no hair, these busts have compacted, almost invisible necks, which further lends focus to their expressions. The last category, busts with outstretched necks, has two *Beak Head* sculptures as members. In contrast to the compacted necks, the busts with projected necks contain Heads that are so outstretched that they seem to be on the verge of tearing. Although this radical projection of the neck is the opposite of nearly eliminating the neck altogether, it also forces facial expression to be the center of attention by coercing the viewer to notice the bust’s face.

This chapter seeks to evaluate Messerschmidt’s method of producing the Heads, examine possible origins of his aesthetic choices, connect the Heads to modern art, and discuss transformations in reception history from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. It is worthwhile to begin with a detailed eyewitness account of Messerschmidt’s studio in Preßburg, found in the article of a traveling German journalist called Friedrich Nicolai.60

59 Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” 209.
60 Friedrich Nicolai was a writer, publisher, and book seller who wanted to promote higher education and critical thinking in the late-eighteenth century. He was a member of the Berlin Society of Friends of Enlightenment, as well as Illuminati. He participated in weekly group meetings to discuss the political, social, and philosophical issues of the day. For more information about Nicolai, see Pamela E. Selwyn, “Friedrich Nicolai, Buchhändler and Aufklärer,” in *Everyday Life in the German Book Trade* (University
A Curious Journalist’s Encounter with Messerschmidt

Due to the Character Heads’ unique attributes, viewers were prompted to question Messerschmidt’s motives and inspirations for the unusually contorted expressions. The German journalist Friedrich Nicolai offered a vivid insight to Messerschmidt’s creative process in his article, “Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781,” after taking a detour to Preßburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia) following a recommendation from an artist that Messerschmidt knew in Rome. Nicolai’s article is the most descriptive known primary resource of Messerschmidt’s studio in Preßburg. He claimed that the signs of “madness” in the Character Heads are due to the combination of Messerschmidt’s theories about proportions, notions of spirits, and his knowledge of a combination of multifarious artistic styles.

According to Nicolai’s observations of his studio, Messerschmidt owned an Italian book about human proportions. His interest in focusing on proportions in his artistic process can be traced back to his time in Rome where the beauty of Neoclassicism involved simplicity and replicating accurate human body proportions in art. Nicolai’s report shows that Messerschmidt continued his studies of proportion for his Character Heads, but he was clearly no longer concerned with depicting realistic proportions.

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Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 1-28. For more information about Nicolai’s association with the aforementioned groups, see Selwyn, “Friedrich Nicolai, Buchhändler and Aufklärer,” 4-5.

61 Friedrich Nicolai, “Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781,” in Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism, ed. Maria Pötzel-Malikova et al. (New York: Neue Galerie, 2010), exhibition catalog, 207-10.

While in Vienna, Messerschmidt was in a society that promoted arcane knowledge about spirits and attempts to control forces of nature. He theorized that the proportions of the face correspond to sections of the body. In following this idea, he believed that the occurrences of pain in his belly or thighs were caused by specific sections of the bust that he was carving. Nicolai claims that Messerschmidt, although a genius artistically, was very gullible and had a “fiery imagination.” The artist tried to convince Nicolai that spirits truly exist. Despite his attempts to pad his theories with nonsense evidence, Nicolai was not persuaded and blamed the artist’s cloistered life in Preßburg as the cause of his belief in spirits. As a scholar during the Enlightenment, Nicolai inquired about the relationship between spirits and Messerschmidt’s art in order to rationalize the artist’s creative process, and he received reticent and unclear answers. From what Nicolai understood, a “Spirit of Proportion” plagued Messerschmidt at night because it was jealous of the artist’s gifted ability to accurately and effortlessly recreate the human figure on stone, thus achieving the ability to render perfect proportions.

According to Nicolai’s observations, vanity caused Messerschmidt to believe that evil spirits, namely the Spirit of Proportion, were jealous of his ability to achieve perfect proportions in his art. The Spirit of Proportion would reportedly cause Messerschmidt’s physical pains. As an attempt to ward off the Spirit, Messerschmidt would pinch various parts of his body, especially his right ribcage, to produce a foul grimace. Once he thought he reached the sublimity

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63 Messerschmidt thought he had confirmed his notion of corresponding proportions after meeting with an English visitor who claimed to have had similar pains that coincided with sections of his face. Unfortunately, due to communication barriers between the solely German-speaking Messerschmidt and the English traveler, information shared between the two was most likely misunderstood because they carried out their discussion using hand signals. See Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” in Franz Xaver Messerschmidt 1736-1783, 209.
64 See chapter 1, pp. 25-26.
of facial proportions after glancing at his expression in a mirror, he copied his reflection in sculpture to preserve the grimaces. As reported by Nicolai, Messerschmidt posited that sixty-four different grimaces existed, and sixty were completed when Nicolai visited him. When Nicolai observed Messerschmidt carving his sixty-first Head, he noticed that the artist looked in a mirror approximately every thirty seconds, and precisely recorded his expression.

**The Question of Self-Portraiture**

Although Nicolai witnessed a moment in which Messerschmidt transcribed himself into a Character Head, the question of whether or not this artist continuously produced his identity in the series lives on today. One of the Heads, *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing* (fig. 2.1), is the most notable supposed self-portrait, as its title indicates. Here, the sitter is wearing a cap that resembles a popular winter hat of Slovak peasants. This personal and commonplace accessory offers an opportunity for viewers to relate to the artist, assuming he is the one being portrayed. Furthermore, his toothy smile and relaxed eyes exhibit intimacy between the sitter and the viewer. Such vulnerability is rare in the Character Head series.

In studying comparisons between portraits of Messerschmidt that are not Character Heads (fig. 2.2) and members of the distorted series, however, it is still uncertain as to whether or not all members of the collection are, in fact, self-portraits. For example, the noses of certain busts are either too pointed or more crooked than Messerschmidt’s. Others have eyes that are proportionally smaller or larger than the artist’s. Or perhaps Messerschmidt has so severely proportionally smaller or larger than the artist’s. Or perhaps Messerschmidt has so severely

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66 It is important to reiterate that Messerschmidt did not assign titles to the Character Heads, but rather, unknown scholars labeled all of these busts subsequent to Messerschmidt’s death. Therefore, any conclusion deeming a Character Head as a self-portrait is subjective and was probably a result of comparing portraits of Messerschmidt to the Character Head in question.

distorted his figure when making his sculptures that he became unrecognizable as a Character Head. After all, his main purpose was to reportedly defend himself against demons, which conceivably required him to over exaggerate his grimaces. Thus, rendering these sculptures nearly unrecognizable as human faces produces a form that is distant from his facial identity, a visage vicious enough to repel his demons. Still, some scholars argue that all the Heads are self-portraits due to Nicolai’s report on Messerschmidt’s method of creating them.  

Unlike *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing*, the majority of Character Heads pose more challenges for most viewers to relate to, as they are bound by disfigurations to the point of being grotesque. Messerschmidt’s familiarity with an array of facial expressions in art and science that he encountered in Vienna and Rome, in addition to his own imagination, could have collectively contributed to the characteristics of the Heads. All the busts share patterns of deep wrinkles specifically on the forehead, around the eyes, and surrounding the mouth. Some Heads have features that cause them to seem more demonic, while others are slight variations of *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing*.

The reason for the tightly sealed lips on the majority of Character Heads was revealed in Nicolai’s text. Messerschmidt believed it was an animalistic instinct to keep the lips closed: “Man must simply pull in the red of the lips entirely because no animal shows it … animals have great advantages over men; they could recognize and feel many things in nature that remain concealed to men.”  

In other words, Messerschmidt concluded that animals have more acute senses that better detect spirits. He, therefore, thought that integrating the defense mechanism of

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69 Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” 209.
animals into his sculptures would better shield him from the attacking spirits. Messerschmidt’s fascination with animal tendencies can be associated with his curiosity in physiognomy.

There is, however, one bust that does dare to display the rouge of his lip. A *Hypochondriac* (fig. 1.17) is a member of the “bald oval head” group, and unlike its sculptural siblings, this bust is exposing the inner flesh of his lower lip. He exhibits fewer wrinkles than the other Character Heads, and his skin is smoothed even further by either the lead or lead alloy that Messerschmidt used to make him. The combination of a pout, drooping eyes, and lack of wrinkles seems to convey emotional affliction, rather than physical pain, a quality that is flaunted by the majority of Character Heads, making this bust a unique one among the Heads. A few other portrait busts go against Messerschmidt’s philosophy of having a closed mouth for defense by baring their teeth. *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing* (fig. 2.1), for example, shows a smile, and therefore content instead of torment.

Despite the deformities, the Heads retain some indications of human qualities. For instance, bilateral symmetry, a feature that characterizes the human face, is present in many of these sculptures. Messerschmidt kept his two eyes and symmetrical nose, all the while distorting his skin, neck, and occasionally, his mouth in order to achieve the high intimidation factor he wanted to use against his demons. This unique combination of human attributes and animalistic malformations leads scholars to question whether to not these faces are of the artist himself.

Still, the high amounts of animal traits observed in the Character Heads confirm that they are not exact self-portraits, but rather Messerschmidt’s attempt at hiding behind masks of writhing expressions. Although he did not explicitly state where he extracted inspiration for the faces, examinations of scientific studies and art that he most likely saw reveal clues to their aesthetic origins.
**Considering the Study of Physiognomy**

The 18\textsuperscript{th} century interest in Europe to decipher the masked meanings of facial expressions celebrated the study of physiognomy. Johann Caspar Lavater from Switzerland was the famed physiognomist at the time. His *Physiognomische Fragmente* was said to be as necessary as the Bible to his followers. It was translated into four different languages and distributed throughout Europe, making it virtually impossible for any literate person to be unaware of this publication.\textsuperscript{70} Lavater’s notion of physiognomy is a combination of the neo-Socratic concept of *kalokagathia*, or the idea that physical beauty represents virtue and ugliness symbolizes vice, as well as Giambattista della Porta’s ideas that are revealed in his *De Humana Physiognomonia* (1586). The latter comprises observations and theories of anthromorphology visualized in drawings, which allowed for side-by-side comparisons between animal and human expressions. The seventeenth century French painter and art student in Rome Charles Le Brun took anthromorphology a step further by drawing studies of combined facial features of humans and animals (fig. 2.3), and assigning descriptions of personality titles to his illustrations.\textsuperscript{71} It is highly probable that Messerschmidt had access to these literatures about physiognomy, and used images in these works in the development of the Character Heads. The idea of complementing human expressions with the more aggressive ones of animals could have been borrowed from the anthromorphology studies of Charles Le Brun.

Messerschmidt’s studies of sculpture in Rome may have emphasized his incorporation of physiognomy in portrait busts, as well. The ancient Greeks developed the “science” of


physiognomy from which they invented a comprehensive semiology of the human face under the impact of emotions.\textsuperscript{72} The Romans later implicated these theories when immortalizing themselves in marble.\textsuperscript{73}

**The Impact of Franz Anton Mesmer and Animal Magnetism**

Other possible muses for distorted faces are experiments by Franz Anton Mesmer, who was introduced earlier as a patron of Messerschmidt’s works. In addition to being a friend and neighbor of Mesmer, Messerschmidt was a supporter of Mesmer’s experiments with “Animal Magnetism,” a controversial method of curing diseases and mental illnesses. Animal magnetism has origins in Isaac Newton’s scientific method theories (Newtonianism) and astrology.\textsuperscript{74} The practice is based on the notion that the attraction of planets plays a vital role in human health because the relationship between planets affects an invisible fluid found in the body and in nature.\textsuperscript{75} According to the promoters of this controversial procedure, diseases are defined as hindrances in the fluid’s flow, but these issues can be solved with “trancelike convulsions.”\textsuperscript{76} For some of his experiments, Mesmer used a “baquet,” a magnetized tub surrounded by rods filled with iron fillings and powdered glass (fig. 2. 4). Using this practice, Mesmer sought to cure insanity by cleansing the patient’s spirit and reorganizing the magnetic pull within his or her body.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Malen, *The New Society*, 29.
\textsuperscript{76} Malen, *The New Society*, 30.
Mesmer’s unorthodox practice of Animal Magnetism, which eventually led to his exile in Paris, involved medical experiments on psychotic patients to cure their ailments. One of his experiments required patients to wrap themselves in hemp ropes that were attached to a baquet filled with magnetic fluid and allow the magnetic particles to pass through their bodies in order to restore fluid balance. Messerschmidt was said to observe these practices, and as a gullible man with a blazing imagination, he was intrigued by and noted the extreme facial expressions of Mesmer’s patients. Moreover, given Messerschmidt’s reported psychosis, he may have even participated in these experiments. As seen in engravings depicting scenes of Animal Magnetism experiments (fig. 2.5), patients have undergone treatments that cause them to show discomfort in their faces. In addition to incorporating patients’ expressions possibly in moments of pain or discomfort during sessions, Messerschmidt may have alluded to Mesmer’s medical instruments on his Heads. The Hanged Man (fig. 2.6), for instance, contains a rope wrapped around its neck, and it has been suggested that this rope represents a hemp cord used for Mesmer’s baquet cures. Additionally, another Head entitled Scholar, Poet (fig. 2.7) has a cord around the top of its head, as if the device were a crown of laurel leaves, and is said to be a self-portrait that possibly reflects the artist’s own experience with Mesmer’s Animal Magnetism. Unlike The Hanged Man, which is clearly frozen in an uncomfortable state of an Animal Magnetism session with its tightened lips and scrunched nose, the face of Scholar, Poet with its open eyes and relaxed muscles suggests that it is either in the beginning stages or final relaxed state of an experiment.

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79 Boström, “Return to Vienna,” 11.
Expressions of Anguish in Vienna and Rome

In addition to scientific influences, certain features suggesting pain and suffering may have also been drawn from sculptures in Messerschmidt’s adopted hometown of Vienna, particularly those nested in the pulpit of St. Stephen’s Cathedral (fig. 2.8), or Stephansdom, located in the center of the inner city. These late Gothic-style sculptures are attributed to the Dutch sculptor Nikolaus Gerhaert and exhibit figures with hollowed cheeks and deformed necks. Their mouths gape open as if to let out screams, and others show signs of severe depression with sinking frowns. Details of every wrinkle and face contour create exaggerated expressions on these sculptures. In keeping with typical medieval sculptural styles, the faces of Stephansdom figures are severely distorted. Such signs of passion were believed to represent sin in medieval culture. As a contributor of neoclassical depictions of The Virgin Mary (fig. 2.9) and Saint John (fig. 2.10) for the Lower Sacristy of Stephansdom in 1768, Messerschmidt could have well studied the grotesque sculptures in the pulpit of this cathedral, and later applied memories of what he saw to his Character Heads in Slovakia.

There is evidence suggesting that Messerschmidt borrowed stylistic elements from the sculptures of Balthasar Ferdinand-Moll for his earlier baroque works. It is also possible that Ferdinand-Moll’s style played a part in creating the exaggerated expressions of the more modern style Character Heads, as well. Moll’s Field Marshall Joseph Wenzell Prince of Liechtenstein is adorned with a pair of disfigured faces on each shoulder (figs. 2.11 and 2.12). These faces seem lugubrious due to their enormous drooping eyes that are accentuated by wrinkles on their foreheads and bags underneath their eyes.

82 Sauerländer, “The Fate of the Face in Medieval Art,” 3.
84 See chapter 1, pp. 11-14.
Messerschmidt may have gathered retrospective inspiration for the Heads in Rome while he was learning about Neoclassicism. The menacing faces of certain classical sculptures probably have given Messerschmidt ideas for his tools to intimidate demons with both suffering faces that allude to screaming and seemingly defiant facial expressions. The portrait of Caracalla (fig. 1.9) and the famous Laocōn (fig. 2.13) were created in this frightening spirit. The furrowed brow and crevices of wrinkles seen on both could have been incorporated into the Heads. In continuing with the examination of the Character Heads’ lips, the tightened mouths of certain Heads are reminiscent of Caracalla’s shut pout. The Difficult Secret (fig. 2.14) and A Strong Man (fig. 2.15) carry lip shapes that suggest stern personalities similar to the one exemplified in the Caracalla sculpture. The gaping mouth of the Laocōn also exudes an element of awe, but with the impression that the depicted figure is omitting a terrifying scream. The subject’s face elicits expressions of suffering and struggle. Similarly, the wide-open mouth of The Yawner (fig. 2.16) depicts a moment in which the sitter is wailing in pain, despite its somewhat misleading title.

As mentioned in chapter one, Messerschmidt was acquainted with the former director of the Accademica di San Luca, Filippo della Valle.85 Although the existence of any documentation indicating that he visited the academy is unknown, it is plausible that Messerschmidt saw the art collection of the academy. The Accademia policy, established since its opening in 1577, was that each student should donate a work for posterity.86 One donation, Il Dolore (fig. 2.17) by Adam Lambert Sigisbert, shares strikingly similar qualities to a number of Messerschmidt’s Character Heads. First of all, the figure’s face clearly displays signs of suffering. The portrait, whose title translates to pain, features a dehiscing mouth along with what

85 See chapter 1, p. 18.
seems to be a serpent crowning the top of his head and choking his neck. Furthermore, like the Character Heads, Il Dolore is a presentation of an exaggerated expression using only the subject’s head and neck.

Since Messerschmidt sought to appear strong and defensive when the Spirit of Proportion confronted him, it is plausible that he remembered his reaction to the portrait of Caracalla, Laocōon, and Il Dolore when he first saw them. Judging from the accounts of other viewers, Messerschmidt was most likely left aghast when he studied these classical works, and probably wanted to impale the demons with the same astonishing force that he experienced upon witnessing these powerful sculptures in Rome.

A Study of Hairstyles

Messerschmidt’s reason for presenting various hairstyles on the Character Heads is still unknown. Some, such as The Vexed Man, boast long locks, while others, like The Yawner, have no hair at all. In any case, the hairstyles resemble those seen on Republican Roman busts. His likely appearance at the galleries of the Capitoline Museum must have had some impact on this design assortment, as Imperial portraits of Rome exhibited such diverse hairstyles.

An example of detailed long locks characteristic of the Republican Roman style can be seen on a portrait of an unknown from the Capitoline collection (fig. 2.18). This long, chin-length hairstyle is only seen on alabaster Heads, such as the aforementioned Vexed Man. Several portraits, both in alabaster and lead-tin alloy, were given cropped, curly hair that can be compared to the hairstyles of numerous Roman emperors. The portrait of Caracalla, for instance, has short hair with detailed curls. The ubiquitous portraits of Cesar (fig. 2.19) that Messerschmidt must have encountered while in Rome also sport this cropped look. This short
hairstyle is observed on the majority of Messerschmidt’s Heads. *The Enraged and Vengeful Gypsy, Childish Weeping, Scholar, Poet, and A Dismal and Sinister Man*, to name a few, all display cropped hair. As for the Character Heads who lack hair, clues for the inspiration for this style have yet to be uncovered. Perhaps Messerschmidt sought to allocate his time towards rendering expressions, rather than carving detailed curls when he produced bald Character Heads, such as *The Yawner* and *The Hanged Man*.

**The Influence of Egypt**

In continuing with the discussion of proportion, Messerschmidt believed that Egyptians mastered sublime proportions. He owned an Egyptian figurine while he was in Preßburg and drew his own Egyptian model, which hung above his window for inspiration. Additionally, it is possible that Messerschmidt did not limit his studies only to Roman and copies of Greek sculptures while he was in Rome. After all, as Nicolai mentioned in his essay, Messerschmidt expressed his intense interest in Egyptian art during their conversation. Some qualities of Messerschmidt’s sculptures suggest that he may have observed Egyptian sculptures at the Villa Albani. One Character Head in particular, *A Severely Injured Person* (fig. 2.20), conveys a striking resemblance to *Head of a Female Sphinx* (fig. 2.21), which was once part of the Villa Albani collection. Other than sharing similar shades of slate caused by the use of chlorite in the *Sphinx* and lead-tin alloy in the *Injured Person*, both sculptures most notably display wing-shaped contours of ancient Egyptian headdress, which emphasize symmetry, and align with

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87 In Part One of chapter four of Winckelmann’s *The History of Ancient Art*, a source that Messerschmidt most likely had access to, he makes references to Egyptian art for his discussions on proportions. See Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, pp. 207-8.
88 Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” 209.
89 The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna displayed Egyptian Art while Messerschmidt was in Austria. However, this museum did not carry sculptures similar to the *Sphinx* in the Villa Albani.
Messerschmidt’s interest in proportions. The headdress of the Sphinx displays linear textures that are clearly distinguished from the smooth surface of the figure’s face, suggesting this piece was a removable accessory of the sitter. In contrast, Messerschmidt gradually melded the texture of his Character Head’s headpiece into the smooth surface of the face, thus creating the illusion that the headpiece is naturally part of the head. Unlike the regal piece of the Female Sphinx, the play with texture on the Injured Person creates the impression of a deformity. Thus, in combination with the already menacing grimace, Messerschmidt’s headpiece adds to a shocking portrait.

These connections to physiognomy and the radical science of Animal Magnetism show that the Character Heads were formulated for a deeper purpose than indications used to label Messerschmidt as a mad man. Moreover, the evidence of influence from Medieval, Roman, and Egyptian art demonstrate this artist’s talent of sculpting in a medley of artistic styles. Unfortunately, this fashion did not concur with early viewers. Consequently, the question about reception history must begin on a negative note, as the audience of the eighteenth century approached the Heads with mockery. However, viewers of the Heads in the nineteenth century reevaluated the humor associated with Messerschmidt’s eccentric sculptures as brilliant attempts to display satirical messages. Enthusiastic studies of Messerschmidt’s art began to peak in the twentieth century concurrently with rising interests in psychoanalysis and Expressionism.

**An Analysis of the Reception of the Character Heads in the Eighteenth Century**

As introduced in the beginning of this chapter, the Character Heads were neglected, and they have been used for games at the Vienna Prater. With feasible inspiration from and similarities with such acclaimed and respected works of art, it is a wonder why the Character
Heads were ridiculed. For centuries, the public has faced depictions of grotesque faces and monstrous grimaces without reacting with contempt. The suffering figures in St. Stephen’s Cathedral served as ghastly warnings for consequences of sin. Charles Le Brun’s drawings were innovative for studying physiognomy at the time. Balthasar-Ferdinand Moll’s portrait of Field Marshall Josef Wenzel along with a pair of tortured faces dripping from his shoulder pads was welcomed into the Habsburg family’s collection. Viewers were left awestruck by classical sculptures in Rome, not confounded or disgusted by their exaggerated expressions.

The fact that the Character Heads are mere presentations of expressions without narratives possibly disconcerted eighteenth-century viewers. In contrast to the Heads, the contorted face of the glorified Laocōon was associated with the story of Laocōon’s punishment by Poseidon, a tale from classical mythology. His emotions were validated by his struggle against the vicious snakes surrounding him, and therefore, the subject’s reasons for having a face signaling agony was understood. The Character Heads, on the other hand, lack visual clues for the origins of their distorted expressions. The absence of a scene, bodies, or props to illustrate a narrative causes viewers to see them as playful masks.

Knowledge of Messerschmidt’s personal history, as well as the titles attached to his sculptures following his death may have contributed to adverse reactions towards the Heads. As an artist active during the Enlightenment, Messerschmidt encountered critics who rationalized everything and harshly questioned improbable theories, especially the apparitional ones that were so strongly regarded by Messerschmidt. Moreover, Messerschmidt was known as the vexed artist who went mad because of his dismissal from the Academy of Fine Arts and newspaper publications of his isolation. Additionally, Messerschmidt continued to be ridiculed after his death through the humiliation of his Character Heads. As previously mentioned, Messerschmidt
did not assign names to any of his Character Heads. Furthermore, he did not even coin the term ‘Character Head’ (Charakterköpfe in German). Instead, the artist referred to his personal project as Kopfstücke, or ‘Head Pieces.’\footnote{Nicolai, “Description of a Journey,” 209.} The hilarious, albeit misleading, names is a factor that could have obtained discredit from viewers and prevented early scholars from viewing them as serious art historical subjects.

**Subjects of Satire in the Nineteenth Century**

Nineteenth-century viewers continued to see the Character Heads in facetious approaches with perceptions of them as satirical subjects. This chapter was introduced with a quote by a critic of an 1867 exhibition connecting Messerschmidt’s Character Heads to the caricature prints of William Hogarth (fig. 2.22). Commentators in Central Europe commonly made this connection, which reached its height when Franz Gräffer, a Viennese essayist, published his work entitled “The Hogarth of Sculpture” in 1846.\footnote{Michael Yonan, “Messerschmidt, the Hogarth of Sculpture,” in *Seeing Satire in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Elizabeth C. Mansfield and Kelly Malone (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 2013), 211.} Gräffer’s publication took Messerschmidt’s Character Heads a step above superficial humor by arguing that the artist cleverly used satire to reveal suppressed truths of the human mind. Gräffer’s essay is an early scholarly analysis of the Heads, and he was perhaps the first critic to see them in an intellectual manner. His opinions of the Character Heads was a significant turn against the mocking comments revealed through the posthumous titles assigned to the Heads during their first exhibition in 1793.

While Hogarth sought to communicate his comments of society through satire, some scholars argue that the ideas of the German physicist and satirist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg
are even closer to the message that Messerschmidt wished to convey with his Character Heads. This conclusion was reached due to the fact that Lichtenberg’s studies, like Messerschmidt’s, reached beyond the social and centered on the psychological. He harshly dismissed and criticized Lavater’s superficial judgment of character based on the fairness or homeliness of faces. Instead, Lichtenberg promoted the study of pathognomy, which used facial expressions to unveil emotions during specific moments, rather than a person’s permanent character. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century satirical analyses of the Character Heads seem to rely too heavily on the titles, which reveal more about the opinions of scholars rather than those of the artist himself.

**Character Heads Under the Lens of Psychoanalysis**

It was not until well after Messerschmidt’s time that the stylistic origins of the demonic Heads were tackled in serious scholarship. The late-nineteenth century advent of Freudian thought and implementation of psychoanalysis to Art History welcomed the Character Heads as scholarly studies of the human psyche. The 1932 publication of *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* by the art historian and psychoanalyst Ernst Kris and subsequent study of Messerschmidt in *Imago*, the publication for psychoanalytical studies, transformed Messerschmidt and his production of Heads into a study of psychoanalysis that paralleled the deep curiosity in psychoanalytical studies in art. For art historians, this consequently piqued interests in Character Heads at the time. *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* presents the most prominent evaluation

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92 Yonan, “Messerschmidt, the Hogarth of Sculpture,” 210.
94 Ernst Kris, “Ein geisteskranker Bildhauer (Die Charakteröpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt)” *Imago* 19 (1933), 384-411.
of Messerschmidt’s case in terms of psychoanalysis. By evaluating Messerschmidt’s jumbled explanations in Nicolai’s essay, Kris concluded that the Character Heads are Messerschmidt’s physical attempts of dealing with schizophrenia and understanding reality following his, as Messerschmidt believed, inflicted and irrational betrayal of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.95

Throughout his essay, Kris maintains that Messerschmidt’s goal was not to capture emotion, but rather to study the relationship between different facial muscles and the performance of various facial functions. For instance, The Yawner is an exemplification of the act of yawning with no emotion involved. According to Kris, grimaces arise in the Heads at times of aggression, while Messerschmidt was attempting to push the boundaries of expression. Kris explains the purpose of the grimace in his essay in psychoanalytical terms: “When the ego temporarily loses control over the facial expression, the ego has been overwhelmed by passions and cannot exercise its functions … it is unable to control its musculature.”96 Kris continues with his claim that the production of grimaces was an apotropaic act, and Messerschmidt was trying to gain control over the demons with his many scowling faces. He then comes to the conclusion that the Heads are “autoplastic ancestors of masks.”97

Kris’ essay is most notable for introducing the study of sexual symbolism to the Character Heads. Since Messerschmidt lived in solitude, Kris hypothesized that the lonely artist kept to a chaste lifestyle, but his physical desires escaped through his psychotic breakdowns when he lost control of his thoughts. Messerschmidt wanted to regain his purity because, according to Kris, he believed that the devilish spirits were after him for having sinful

95 Scholars are still at a debate as to whether or not Messerschmidt had schizophrenia. Since Messerschmidt continued to take commissions for neoclassical style medallions simultaneously with the production of Character Heads, some art historians are reluctant to note that this artist was completely mad.
propensities, in addition to mastering proportion. Kris sees the tightly closed lips of the busts as metaphors for chastity belts used to virtuously shield Messerschmidt from sexual desires. Kris lends particular focus to two extremely unusual sculptures nicknamed the “Beak Heads” (figs. 2.23 and 2.24) for their long, protruding lips that seem to imitate bird beaks on bald heads atop strenuously elongated necks. Kris saw the Beak Heads as phallic responses to the spirits’ seductive efforts towards Messerschmidt. In Kris’ opinion, the Beak Heads were distorted to capture the impression of both female and male sexual organs.

**Relationship to Expressionism**

The late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries renewed a surge of interests in the Heads since scholars discovered all sixty-four survivors in 1793. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century, German and Austrian Expressionism dominated the art scene. The concept of using art to present a subjective perspective of the world or in human nature in order to evoke certain moods or ideas was the trend of Expressionism. Although there is no evidence suggesting that Messerschmidt’s art had direct guidance for the ideas of Expressionist artists, his Character Heads seem as if they could have been produced at this time in the twentieth century, instead of during the transition period from Baroque to Neoclassicism. Messerschmidt’s renditions of pure expression exemplify distortions of reality, which are contortions of human expressions in the case of the busts. Messerschmidt’s befitting style in early twentieth century Expressionism can be observed in a stylistic comparison between his *Vexed Man* and *Self-Portrait as a Warrior* by Oskar Kokoschka (fig. 2.25). The similarities in writhing facial expressions between *The Vexed Man* and *Self-Portrait as a Warrior* can be seen in the use of numerous wrinkles and simple use of only a head and neck. Moreover, the drooping eyes and mouth, as well as the crooked nose
are reminiscent of many Character Heads. The focal point of absolute expression is emphasized by both artists’ exclusion of extravagant accessories, as well as the elimination of other upper body parts, such as shoulders. Kokoschka, however, took the level of grotesque a step further by using flesh tones and blue-green veins on his sculpture.

As previously discussed, the absence of a narrative when observing the Character Heads is a possible factor that led the eighteenth century viewer to harshly criticize or mock these busts. However, Messerschmidt’s focus solely on expressions resonated with the concepts of Expressionism. It is this sole focus on human emotions that allow the Character Heads to give rise to issues of modernity that are seen in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and distance them from art of their own time. Expressionism “reflected the deep intellectual unrest c. 1900, reflected in contemporary literary sources about the destruction of the traditional relationship of trust between man and the world.”

In order to reveal the state of the human spirit at the time, Expressionists employed violent brush strokes, aggressive distortions, and emblematic colors in their art. The purpose of Expressionism reflects Messerschmidt’s frustration with the city of Vienna following his dismissal by the Academy of Fine Arts and Habsburg royals. His angst was potent enough to urge his move out of the city, and seems to be depicted in the faces of the Character Heads. The appearance of new media applications in art relate to Messerschmidt’s use of severe disfigurations to exhibit a range of emotions.

20th Century Collections and the Character Heads as Pedagogical Subjects

The Character Heads have experienced moments of fame and praise for their unique appearances in the past century, beginning in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. The positive reception of

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the Character Heads in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries parallels the artistic, literary, and scientific findings of the time. Johann II, Prince of Liechtenstein was intrigued by the aberrant Character Heads, and commissioned photographer Josef Wlha to photograph his personal collection of plaster cast copies of Messerschmidt’s Heads for a collection catalog.  

Additionally, the Viennese art critic Ludwig Hevesi’s positive review of the Hagenbund exhibition in 1907 featuring the Heads contributed to a rejuvenated interest in Messerschmidt’s work. Several of the busts have provenance histories that are associated with some of the most prestigious Viennese collections, including those of members of the Viennese elite who supported the Vienna Succession and the Wiener Werkstätte, such as the writer Richard Beer-Hofmann.

One family of art collectors, the Zuckerkanlds, significantly propelled the Character Heads to fame for their intellectual prowess and spectacular craftsmanship, as opposed to only associating their strange appearances with the work of a madman. Before *The Ill-Humored Man* and *The Incapable Bassoonist* were in the home of Richard Beer-Hofmann, they were part of the Emil and Berta Zuckerkanld collection. The exact reason for the Zuckerkanld’s acquisition of Messerschmidt’s sculptures is still uncertain. However, judging from their personal biographies, one can posit that the Kopfstücke had both intellectual and aesthetic significance to them. In 1888, Emil Zuckerkanld was appointed as professor of anatomy in the University of Vienna. There, he focused on rhinology and studies of the head. His research, as his wife Berta notes, concentrated on head morphology. Other scholars of pathological anatomy, Julius Wagner-

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100 Antonia Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” in *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736-1783: From Neoclassicism to Expressionism*, ed. Maria Pötzl-Malikova et al. (New York: Neue Galerie, 2010), exhibition catalog, 48.

101 Boström, ““Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,”” 48.
Jauregg and Richard Krafft-Ebing among them, praised Dr. Zuckerkanndl’s findings and methods of research, in which he paid close attention to the morphology of the nose. As an anatomist specializing in physiognomy and pathology, Dr. Zuckerkanndl must have noticed Messerschmidt’s fascination in the transformations of human facial muscles. For Emil Zuckerkanndl, the Character Heads probably served as excellent tools for research and education of physiognomy under extreme facial transformations.

Berta Zuckerkanndl’s cultural ties to the Heads complemented her husband’s curiosities for them. Her father’s connections to Austrian elites led to their appearances in social gatherings and acquaintances with significant artistic and academic figures. Berta Zuckerkanndl was one of the most prominent supporters of the Vienna Secession, especially Gustav Klimt. It is possible that Zuckerlandl resonated with the anguished expressions of the Character Heads that were in tune with the inner turmoil that pervaded fin-de-siècle mentality. It is also likely that she admired them for the high level of artistic skill exemplified in these sculptures. Berta’s introduction to art was through the teachings of the Baroque scholar, Professor Albert Ilg, whom she greatly admired. Ilg has written about Messerschmidt’s Character Heads and often compared them to Hogarth’s caricatures. Instead of reproaching the sculptures for their disfigurement due to their likeness to caricature, Ilg argued that ‘caricature’ is “too weak” and “too narrow” of a term to describe what the Heads symbolize. He praised Messerschmidt’s signs of madness as complex studies that go beyond purely aesthetic examinations, and, in addition, delve into subjects of spiritualism, psychology, and physiognomy. Berta Zuckerlandl most likely took note of Professor Ilg’s positive observations when purchasing the Heads.

Another notable purchase of the Character Heads for educational purposes was by the

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102 Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” 49.
103 Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” 50.
104 Boström, “Messerschmidt’s Artistic Reception at the Two Fins-de-Siècle,” 51.
Viennese urban planner Camillo Sitte. Sitte was conductive in collecting Character Heads for the Vienna Government Craft School where they were used as Lehrmittel, or didactic tools for art students.\(^{105}\) At the Craft School, the Character Heads took on a new life as subjects for the study of expressions. In this sense, the busts served an academic purpose to students similar to the uses of Le Brun’s sketches or plaster casts of antique sculpture to teach art students about the rendering of faces in art.

Josef Urban, Sitte’s colleague, discovered several abandoned Character Heads stuffed in crates stored at Schellinggasse in 1907. Although they were neglected and some were damaged, Urban arranged a display of the newly discovered Heads at the Twenty-Second Hagenbund Exhibition.\(^{106}\) These heads were shown alongside many modern paintings. Following this exhibition, the Heads were sent to Österreichische Galerie Belvedere where they continue to attract curious museum visitors today.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced numerous themes associated with the Character Heads, many of which are new to the study of Messerschmidt’s works. Several of these themes have the potential to lead towards additional discoveries concerning theories about the meaning of the Character Heads and Messerschmidt’s purpose in creating them, as well as possibilities to conceive more connections between the Character Heads and other venues of art history. Praise for the Character Heads continues to grow because of the relatively recent curiosity in their complex history and admiration for Messerschmidt as a highly skilled artist. While some are still held in private collections, the majority have been displayed in major museums in Europe for


numerous years. They have attracted audiences in the United States since the 1950s when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston premiered the first American museum acquisition of a Character Head.\textsuperscript{107} Transformations in artistic tastes and ideas have allowed the Character Heads to be seen anew, a remarkable contrast from the first criticisms of these sculptures. Admiration for the Character Heads has continued to spread among scholars and artists in the twenty-first century, which will be discussed in the third chapter.

As discussed in chapter two, Messerschmidt’s Character Heads have more similarities with twentieth century modernity in terms of aesthetic choices and psychoanalytic concepts than early neoclassicism of the eighteenth century. Regarding *Messerschmidt and Modernity* at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the most recent exhibition featuring the creative exchange between the Character Heads and contemporary art, curator Antonia Boström stated “The Character Heads’ very position at the apparent limits of rational art have made them compelling to successive artists and collectors.” The scholarly importance and breathtaking deformities of the portrait busts have pierced the creativity of contemporary artists. Today, artists are attracted to Messerschmidt’s personal struggles, his ability to isolate intense emotions, abstract the human form, and stand out against art of his own time. This chapter examines certain elements that artists of the twenty-first century have extracted from the Character Heads for their own art, including masks and self-portraits, illustrations of turmoil, themes of physiognomy, and dynamic representations of emotions. Although artists in the United States, Europe, and Asia have been known to employ Character Head features into their art, access to ample information about these individuals and the extent to which the portrait busts have had influence on their work is focused on the following selection.

**Tony Bevan: Masking Self-Portraits**

No other artist has inspired Tony Bevan as much as Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. The Character Heads have resonated with the London-based painter since he first saw them as a

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university student. Originally from Bradford, England, Bevan attended Bradford School of Art with focuses on painting and sculpture. He continued his studies in 1971 at Goldsmiths College where he wrote his thesis on the Character Heads and the scholarship of Ernst Kris. In 1974, he entered the Slade School of Fine Art as a postgraduate student. He has held exhibitions at various museums and galleries in Europe and in the United States. Additionally, his works can be seen in public collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art – Los Angeles, Kunsthalle Kiel, National Portrait Gallery, and Tate Modern, among numerous other institutions. The first scholarly comparison between the Character Heads and Tony Bevan’s Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt was displayed in the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1988. Messerschmidt and Modernity, which was hosted by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2012, was the first and only exhibition in the United States that sought to examine correlations between Tony Bevan’s works on paper and Messerschmidt’s Character Heads.

Since the 1980s, Bevan’s depictions of distressed linear facial expressions have been known in Europe for their connotations of individual unrest in an unstable society. One critic observed that the artist was responding to the intensely charged political atmosphere of British society during the rise of Bevan’s popularity in the eighties. His portraits exhibit faces that are anxious and frustrated, perhaps a reflection of his thoughts about political troubles in his country at the time. Scholars have connected his works to those of Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon due to their crude nature and menacing appearances. Unsurprisingly, Bevan took notice of

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113 David Cohen, “Recent Exhibitions of British Figurative Painting. London,” The Burlington Magazine
Messerschmidt’s expressive Character Heads. He uses Messerschmidt’s faces of struggle to support the message of resentment that he was experiencing early in his career.

Bevan explained that he was shocked when he first saw the Character Heads as illustrations in Ernst Kris’s *Psychoanalytical Explorations in Art* and later in situ in the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Seeing the Character Heads in person convinced Bevan to include studies of physiognomy in his portraits. He was captivated by the Character Heads’ quality of not seeming to have originated from the same artist who conformed to the typical baroque style of the eighteenth century, and was initially intrigued by the busts’ apparent modern qualities. Bevan feels especially sympathetic for the troubles that attacked Messerschmidt, not only during the radical turning point in his aesthetic choices, but also the posthumous ridicule through his sculptures. Bevan is upset by the fact that audiences are focusing too heavily on Messerschmidt’s personal hardships and rumors about his mental state when viewing his sculptures, instead of admiring the artist’s skills. The outrageous titles bestowed upon the Character Heads disturbed Bevan because he strongly believes these titles contributed and continue to promote taunts against Messerschmidt. Furthermore, Bevan mentioned that these titles give viewers wrong analyses of the Heads by causing them to seem illustrative of a single emotion, and usually the wrong emotion. According to Bevan, Messerschmidt was attempting to exhibit a multiplicity of emotions simultaneously in each portrait.

As the history of his works in paint and charcoal show, Bevan has an affinity for self-portraits. According to the artist, “When you work on self-portraits, you step out of yourself, you look back at yourself. There is a duality and your own interpretations are influenced by the

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115 Tony Bevan, interview by Karlyn Olvido, November 2012.
outside. Then, you put yourself back into reality.” When asked about a particular quality of Messerschmidt’s portraits that he wanted to include when creating his own image, Bevan responded with his belief that Messerschmidt depicted himself using the facial expressions of other people. He admires Messerschmidt’s decision to portray himself in the masks of others: “An artist has elements of himself in portraits. An artist is in every sculpture or painting somewhere. It is a contemporary thing to make self-portraits from the image of another person.” This is a curious comment because artists have been known to borrow the faces of others in self-portraits for centuries. Bevan’s reason for pinpointing this method of self-portraiture as the Character Heads’ innovative quality is unclear. Nonetheless, this concept motivates Bevan to use the theme of the Character Heads when he recreates his image in art.

Bevan admits to have always subconsciously worked on self-portraits under the light of Messerschmidt’s style since he learned about the artist’s extreme works. Substantial evidence of Messerschmidt’s influence on Tony Bevan early in his career can be observed in his 1992 Self-Portrait (fig. 3.1). The most notable element is Bevan’s rendition of deep wrinkles with stark contrasts of dark red crevices on his beige-pink skin tone. The upward position of his head is an attempt to add an additional element of distortion with the elongation of his neck, along with extremely defined sternocleidomastoid muscles. These strongly outlined features are characteristic of Messerschmidt’s sculptures.

Later in his 1994 Self-Portrait (fig. 3.2), Bevan pursued this distortion of the neck even further. Two years after his 1992 portrait was produced, Bevan decided to remove his body from his portraits altogether. Like Messerschmidt’s rendition of only a head and neck, Bevan’s 1994 portrait exhibits merely his head atop his stretched neck. Another marked difference between his

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1992 and 1994 portraits is increased deformity displayed on the neck. For instance, diagonal lines suggest harsh twisting, creating additional deformity. This piece with a focus on the neck closely relates to Messerschmidt’s *Beak Heads* (figs. 2.21 and 2.22), two Character Heads that Bevan holds in high regard. Although he finds all the Character Heads interesting, Bevan is especially attracted to the more extreme portraits and would have liked to see the original *First Beak Head* (fig. 2.22). The most definable features of the *Beak Heads* are their severely expanded necks, which Bevan seems to mimic in his early portraits. Although Bevan’s self-portraits are heavily disfigured, he includes more human elements than the Character Heads with a tuft of hair and open, alert eyes.

Bevan aims to incorporate a conglomeration of various elements from all the portrait busts when he manifests himself as a Character Head. In 2010, he began creating *Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt*. Although features of the Character Heads can be observed in his early portraits, he only recently began to label them as *Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt* in 2010 in order to pay homage to Messerschmidt as an inspiration for his paintings, as well as to note that artists borrow ideas from past creators. His affinity for the Character Heads is heavily apparent in works of this series. In addition to the dark lines indicting wrinkles paired with long necks, Bevan shows himself with closed eyes and tight lips. These elements are found on the majority of Character Heads, especially on the more deformed ones that Bevan favors.

A study between Messerschmidt’s *Beak Head* (2.22) and one of Bevan’s *Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt* (fig. 3.3) exposes Messerschmidt’s effect on Bevan. Messerschmidt’s *Beak Head* contains an outstretched neck with two harshly defined stretched skin marks in the middle. These lines are faded on the subject’s chest and become clearer towards the head, which suggests

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118 *The First Beak Head was never found. There exists, however, plaster replications of this sculpture. It is survived by its sibling, the Second Beak Head.*
an upward pull. Three circular forms at the bottom of the head mold the bumpy chin. Sinewy lines originating from these circular forms continue with the upward movement, as well as emphasize wrinkles on top of hollowed cheeks. The mouth is pursed and pointed in a form that mirrors the subject’s pointy nose. The subject’s eyes appear to be unnaturally close to each other and are bridged together with crevices of wrinkles. Similarly, Bevan’s *Portrait After Messerschmidt* faces up with lines on the neck that are arranged to reflect the upward-facing orientation of Messerschmidt’s bust. In order to manifest the appearance of an elongated neck on a two-dimensional surface, such as that observed on the *Beak Heads*, Bevan displays an upward perspective of his visage. Unlike Messerschmidt, Bevan needs to introduce his subject with a neck and shoulders that are composed of seven lines tinted with layers of black, red, and orange pigments in order to give his portrayed neck a stretched appearance. These lines of the neck and shoulders, which are the widest on the canvas, progress to the top of the canvas, pulling the viewer’s attention towards the bottom of the head. Once the lines congregate at the chin, which is defined by four swirls that parallel the circular forms of the *Beak Head’s* chin, they divide into nine slightly thinner ones. Some of these lines converge with one another and others continue to separate. Ultimately, they all carry on in an upward motion comparable to that of the *Beak Heads*.

Bevan’s *Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt* seem to have more mask-like qualities than his earlier portraits. While the charcoal wrinkles of his earlier self-portraits are smudged and somewhat blended into the acrylic painted flesh, portraits of his Messerschmidt series have charcoal lines that are more defined. The starkly outlined crevices in the Messerschmidt series give his face more of a stiff, plastic quality that is almost sculptural. Additionally, similar to the majority of Character Heads, all of Bevan’s *Self-Portraits After Messerschmidt* have shut eyes
and tightly closed lips. As Bevan covers himself in Character Head attributes, he seems to acknowledge that he is borrowing ideas from Messerschmidt by creating the appearance of wearing a mask. Consequently, he gives a veil to his own facial identity to address Messerschmidt’s influence on his work.

Florentina Pakosta: Angst in Feminist Art

Florentina Pakosta is the first Austrian and only known female artist to integrate the Character Heads in her works. A native of Vienna, Pakosta grew up in Austria during World War II, and received a degree in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna in 1960. She went on to study art in Paris, Prague and Amsterdam. In 1971, Pakosta co-founded the Vienna Secession, and became the first female board member of this group of mainly male Austrian artists in 1975. She has held several solo exhibitions in the Vienna Secession, the Albertina, the Belvedere, and the Wien Museum. The first major exhibition honoring Pakosta’s art, including drawings inspired by Messerschmidt, took place at the Leopold Museum in 2008. Furthermore, Pakosta’s works have been featured outside of her native Austria, most notably in the Austrian Cultural Institute in Rome.

Pakosta has always been fascinated by self-portraits and capturing social commentaries through caricature of anonymous people. In the 1950s, she would sketch portraits of strangers in bars and in the Vienna Prater with a pen and sometimes with her lipstick. Beginning in 1972, she demonstrated an interest in Messerschmidt’s sculptures with her collection of etchings.

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121 Pokorny, “Florentina Pakosta,“: 2.
entitled *Paraphrases Based on F.X. Messerschmidt’s Character Heads*. She was drawn to the angst exemplified in a number of the Character Heads, as well as related to Messerschmidt’s feeling of being an outcast in the art world. As a female artist living in the male-dominant art culture of Vienna at the time, Pakosta felt exiled and continuously fought for personal artistic recognition through her large-scale art. She saw Messerschmidt as a “kindred spirit” and felt for his need to leave his home in order to feel comfortable enough to pursue his unique style.

Comparisons between the works of Messerschmidt and Pakosta reveal that both artists balance on the border of the real and surreal when they depict human faces. Moreover, their studies of expressions only show the person’s face and neck. For the purpose of a visual comparison, a focus will be put on Pakosta’s *Shrei I* (fig. 3.4) and Messerschmidt’s *The Yawner* (fig. 2.16), which seems to have been the root of Pakosta’s drawing in discussion. By titling her drawing *Shrei I*, which translates to ‘Scream I,’ Pakosta decided to ignore the adopted name of *The Yawner* and used her own morose interpretation of this Character Head instead. Both heads are rendered in a shade of dark gray, are bald, have closed eyes, and exhibit gaping mouths. Similar to Messerschmidt’s work, Pakosta preserved bilateral symmetry in the faces that is present in nature, while simultaneously distorting other features. The figures in these works are recognizable as human faces. Nonetheless, their faces are stretched and flaws are exaggerated to create deformities. *The Yawner*, for instance, has prominent wrinkles to frame his gaping, unusually large mouth, as well as an unnatural amount of creases on his forehead. Although Pakosta did not render a mouth as large as *The Yawner’s*, she did shade in long wrinkles around the mouth, and on the brow of the figure. Pakosta brought her portrait another step into distortion by giving this figure a pair of small eyes and mouth, which are proportionally off from

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the large size of the head, ears and nose. She also armed her drawn Character Head with clearly defined teeth, rather than a detailed tongue, a feature that is nearly absent in *The Yawner*. Perhaps Pakosta borrowed this gesture of revealing the teeth from *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing* (fig. 2.1) or *The Enraged and Vengeful Gypsy* (fig. 3.5). In any case, the addition of bright white teeth against the dark background of the head gives this portrait a menacing appearance.

Pakosta has long been an advocate for feminist art. The year 1968 was the beginning of a major feminist movement in Western Europe as the struggle for female emancipation motivated the formation of feminist groups. Additionally the uproar of protests to enable laws that protect women against domestic violence rattled the region. These conflicts surrounding Pakosta urged her to defend women in her art and criticize patriarchal society. For her feminist movement agenda, Pakosta applied her observation that the Character Heads are tokens of personal struggle into her drawings. Three years after she created her series on the Character Heads, she formulized her own collection of facial expression studies called *Facial Formations*. This collection projected distorted expressions of angst present in the Character Heads onto faces of male artists to display issues that concerned Pakosta as a female artist. Comprised of large photorealist chalk-drawings, *Facial Formations* raised feminist issues that were new to Austrian art, such as professionally suppressing a woman in a world of overpowering masculine dominance. In this array of drawings, Pakosta isolates and magnifies the faces of powerful men in Austrian culture, and studies the nuances of their expressions. Her portrait of *Alfred Hrdlicka* (fig. 3.6) is a rendition of an Austrian painter and sculptor who was active in the 1950s

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until his death in 2009. In this work, she drew from Messerschmidt’s decision to depict only a head and neck. In her series, however, Pakosta adds small glimpses of clothing on the men’s shoulders, including a popped collar for Alfred Hrdlicka. In the case of this portrait, the size of the drawing alone radiates supremacy with the subject directly looking at the viewer. On the other hand, Pakosta’s augmented view of Hrdlicka’s face highlights his flaws. Every miniscule wrinkle and pore is exposed. This results in a contradicting combination of dominance and vulnerability. To add an element of distortion, Pakosta includes immense detail in the throat area, and similar to Messerschmidt’s The Vexed Man (fig. 1.1), gives the portrait a deep suprasternal notch and a stretched neck with pulled skin that was illustrated in an exaggerated way. Much like the Character Heads to most eighteenth century viewers, these close-ups of flaws of the featured male artist invite criticism and mockery from the audience.

**Alejandro Fischer Cardenas: Physiognomy in Portraits**

Alejandro Fischer Cardenas, a Boston-based Colombian artist, began a series of paintings about physiognomic studies when he discovered Messerschmidt’s works. He earned his degree in painting from the Museum School of Fine Arts, Boston in 1995. He has pursued additional studies at the Boston Architectural Center, Eberhard-Karls Universität in Germany and the Rhode Island School of Design. Exhibitions of his works were seen at the Rochester Community Art Center, the School Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the La Pared Gallery in Colombia. Much like the Character Heads to most eighteenth century viewers, these close-ups of flaws of the featured male artist invite criticism and mockery from the audience.

Although there have been no exhibitions that demonstrate the relationship between the paintings of Cardenas and the portrait busts of Messerschmidt, there exists significant evidence exposing the influence that the Character Heads have had on this artist.

“I search hard and enjoy tremendously these portraits that tell the truth about

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someone.” As Cardenas’ quote concerning the Character Heads explains, he admires Messerschmidt’s works for their daring exhibition of wrinkles and frowns to show a person’s true character. The theme of Cardenas’ portraits is to display and embrace, even exaggerate, human flaws. He uses his paintings to respond to the American obsession with hiding behind artificial and idealized faces of celebrities, an infatuation promoted by the pervasive media.

Cardenas’ fascination with the Character Heads began in 2010 when Cardenas visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston with his cousin, a sculptor, who pointed out Messerschmidt’s *A Hypochondriac* (fig 1.17), and informed Cardenas that the artist and his Character Heads are being rediscovered. As an artist who is very interested in strikingly expressive portraits, Cardenas took an immediate interest in Messerschmidt’s sculptures. His series of physiognomy portraits borrows the term “Character Heads” from Messerschmidt in its title because Cardenas seeks to appropriate certain formal qualities of the Character Heads that are of particular interest to him in his physiognomy series. The collection consists of oil paintings with heavy impasto that imitates sculptural qualities. According to Cardenas, these portraits are of imaginary subjects that were drawn quickly and are meant to exhibit a “collection of psychological expressions with a stronger-than-usual expression, as well as unique assessments of the moods of fleeting moments.”

An analysis between *A Hypochondriac* (fig. 1.17) by Messerschmidt and *Hypochondriac* (fig. 3.7) from Cardenas’ physiognomy portrait series demonstrates the formal qualities that Cardenas has borrowed from Messerschmidt. *A Hypochondriac* by Messerschmidt flaunts a smooth and shiny lead-alloy surface. He is completely bald with an oval-shaped head, and has far less wrinkles than other members of the Character Head collection. The only present

127 Alejandro Fischer Cardenas, interview via email by Karlyn Olvido, November 22, 2011.
128 Alejandro Fischer Cardenas, interview via email by Karlyn Olvido, November 22, 2011.
129 Alejandro Fischer Cardenas, interview via email by Karlyn Olvido, November 22, 2011.
wrinkles are located on the forehead, underneath the eyes, around the mouth, and on the neck. Also unlike his counterparts, *A Hypochondriac* leads with a pout, an exposure of his bottom lip. As mentioned in chapter two, this element is rare in the series. Additionally, the bust sports a furrowed brow on top of eyeballs that are absent of pupils.

Cardenas’ *Hypochondriac*, in contrast, is styled with a blue-tinted pupil on one open eye, while the other remains closed. The fact that this portrait contains a significant amount of wrinkles is another quality that differentiates Cardenas’ portrait from Messerschmidt’s. Shadowing, as well as the heavy impasto that is utilized throughout the painting, accentuate the wrinkles of *Hypochondriac*. His skin is a pink, flesh color with hints of heavy dark gray shadowing, which is probably a reflection of the slate color of the lead in *A Hypochondriac*. Similar to the man in Messerschmidt’s sculpture, the subject of Cardenas’ portrait is revealing the inner flesh of his bottom lip with a pout. The main difference between Messerschmidt’s *A Hypochondriac* and Cardenas’ *Hypochondriac* is Cardenas’ use of color. While Messerschmidt’s bust is monochromatic, Cardenas infuses his painting with various tones of pink, blue-gray, and slate gray. The pout of Cardenas’ subject is highlighted by the red-pink color of the flesh. The pupil of the single eye is dotted with the same blue-gray color that blankets the background.

Although there are some formal differences between Messerschmidt’s *A Hypochondriac* and Cardenas’ *Hypochondriac*, both artists focus on physiognomy and carve personalities into their subjects by implementing wrinkles and an exposed lower lip on the faces. Cardenas dives further into physiognomy in his painting with his use of heavy applications of paint and harsh gray shadows to carve crevices and mold the face of the subject. His decision to include colored flesh and one detailed eye in addition to a pout and wrinkles reveals more human personality.

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130 See chapter 2, p. 24.
than Messerschmidt’s portrait, whose character is largely determined merely by the visibility of his bottom lip in combination with a few wrinkles in between his eyes.

**Tony Cragg: Implementing Movement in the Manifestation of Emotions**

Sculptor Tony Cragg was born in Liverpool in 1949, and currently lives and works in Wuppertal, Germany. He first studied art in the Gloucestershire College of Art, Cheltenham, and continued his studio studies at the Wimbledon School of Art and the Royal College of Art. He has held a professorship at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, and is now the director of this institution. Cragg’s works were included in exhibitions held at the Kunsthalle Bern, Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Wiener Secession in Vienna, Tate Gallery in Liverpool, Royal Academy in London, Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, The Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 2008, the Belvedere Palace premiered the first exhibition about Tony Cragg’s face sculptures in a dialogue with Messerschmidt’s Character Heads called *Tony Cragg >< F.X. Messerschmidt* (fig. 3.8). Following the success of this exhibition, the Louvre invited Cragg to display his works alongside Messerschmidt once more in 2011 for a show called *Tony Cragg: Figure Out Figure In.*

Cragg seeks to infuse his sculptures with emotions because he is moved by the fact that sentiments propel human actions. Furthermore, he aims to create sculptures with “energy” and movement because “sculpture has come a long way from static figurative imitation.” Consequently, he was drawn to the dynamic vivacity expelled from Messerschmidt’s Character

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131 Marie-Laure Bernadac, “Interview with Tony Cragg,” in *Tony Cragg: Figure Out Figure In,* ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2011), exhibition catalog, 76.
133 Henry Loyrette, “Forward,” in *Tony Cragg: Figure Out Figure In,* ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2011), exhibition catalogue.
134 Marie-Laure Bernadac, “Tony Cragg Interview,” in *Tony Cragg: Figure Out Figure In,* ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2011), exhibition catalogue, 74.
Heads. According to Cragg, Messerschmidt’s sculptures do not seem static, and they raise the psyche to the surface. Indeed, Messerschmidt’s treatment of depicting the skin of his sculptures gives them an animated feel. Most of the Heads are shown with pulled skin or tensed muscles, as seen on the Beak Heads and The Vexed Man. Many even capture the act of making expressions, such as The Yawner. These actions frozen in sculpture caught Cragg’s attention, as observed in his works that illustrate faces shaking in motion.

Cragg sculpted a special work specifically for the Tony Cragg: Figure Out Figure In exhibition at the Louvre entitled Versus (fig. 3.9), and it inhabited the heart of I.M. Pei’s Pyramid. This vivid red piece is meant to be seen from multiple angles, each with a unique perspective of several faces. Traces of motion are made palpable by waves of material caressing the faces. Through distortions and superimposed layers, Cragg’s sculpture implies movement and channels the pulled skin present on the Character Heads.

An analysis of The Vexed Man (fig. 1.1) by Messerschmidt alongside Cragg’s Versus reveals how both artists suggest motion in their sculptures in order to manifest potent emotions. Messerschmidt pulled the mouth of his Vexed Man and included intense wrinkles in such a way that distorts the figure, but it is still recognizable enough as a representation of an emotion, perhaps vexation or pain. His tensed muscles in the mouth and neck, in particular, suggest that this is a depiction of a temporary expression that is on the verge of changing, not a permanent face. Cragg, too, deforms his faces in Versus, but with implications of movement through undulating layers of material in place of clear indications of pulled skin. Faces in Cragg’s work are more difficult to distinguish as a result of his use of movement to distort them, rather than skin. The overwhelming layers of material in waves add a level of dynamic features that was inspired by the rippling skin of the Character Heads. However, Cragg adds his distinguishing
flair of violent energy in his sculpture by distorting his faces with motion, rather than an imitation of human flesh. Cragg’s use of movement as a means to distort alludes to the theme of pathognomy observed in the Heads.\textsuperscript{135} Whether or not Cragg looked to the theory of pathognomy for inspiration is unclear, however. Nonetheless, the idea of perpetually changing facial expressions to reveal fleeting emotions relates to Cragg’s intention of depicting motion when rendering the human face.

**Conclusion**

The works of the aforementioned contemporary artists are symbols of the zealous praise that the Character Heads are enjoying today. Artists who have worked with the Character Heads in mind can attest to their power of occupying memories and creative spirits for years. They are sympathetic towards Messerschmidt’s dismissal as a respected artist, and disregard the notion that his mental state was an impediment to his artistic abilities. No matter the medium, from painting to sculpture, it is clear that the innovation and individuality of Messerschmidt’s sculptures ignites the imaginations of many. Themes that were explored in the studies of Messerschmidt’s portrait busts continue to thrive in the work of his successors in the twenty-first century. The Character Heads, which were once used as examples of insanity for freak shows in eighteenth century Austria, are now catalysts for the birth of new art around the world. The shared feelings of angst and curiosities in human facial expressions inspire artists to turn to Messerschmidt and his portraits to support their own ideas in the context of contemporary issues.

\textsuperscript{135} See chapter 2, p. 42.
CONCLUSION

Messerschmidt and his Character Heads will always be a mystery. For my thesis, I did not seek to find exact answers to his training in Rome, the specific aesthetic origins of the strange busts, or his reasons for creating them. This would have been a difficult task, considering the absence of records written by Messerschmidt himself. Instead, the study of Messerschmidt’s work and the Character Heads prove their significance by displaying lenses for viewing the evolution of aesthetic preferences from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Additionally, an analysis of their aesthetic origins highlights possible connections to radically different artistic styles, such as Egyptian, Medieval, Baroque, Neoclassical, and Expressionist art.

My interest in Messerschmidt and my thesis both began because of the enigmas surrounding this artist, which I first encountered in the Messerschmidt and Modernity exhibition. The Character Heads and the history of Messerschmidt’s creative process led to many questions. It seems that every time an answer to a question concerning Messerschmidt is found, another arises. Thus, Messerschmidt, because of the mysteries of his life and the open-endedness of his art, will continue to stimulate new questions, discussions and research.

Differentiating between the definitions of expression versus emotion in regards to the Character Heads allows for nearly unrestricted research possibilities. This battle between the outward appearances of the busts against the Messerschmidt’s intended meanings for each face is a topic that arises in this comprehensive study of his sculptures. Emotion is the inner turmoil of an individual’s personal thoughts, while expression is the physical manifestation of emotion. The public nature of expression invites interpretation from others. Emotion, on the other hand, is more difficult to decipher due to its private nature. Furthermore, expressions have the potential to
be misleading representations of emotions, thereby possibly causing the formulation of inaccurate analyses by viewers. Complex unknown meanings concealed in the emotions instilled in the Character Heads allows for the growth of new research and insights to Messerschmidt’s inspirations and motives for creating such unconventional pieces for his time.

Messerschmidt’s astonishing Character Heads have been opening doors long after his death for future generations of art historical discoveries. For centuries, the Character Heads have proven their power to foster ideas for both art historians and artists. As I discussed in my thesis, these sculptures have already raised issues in physiognomy, pathognomy, satire, psychoanalysis, and ideas for contemporary artists. Without a doubt, Messerschmidt’s sculptures will cause new venues of thinking about art to emerge in the coming years, along with new ways of seeing the Character Heads.
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