

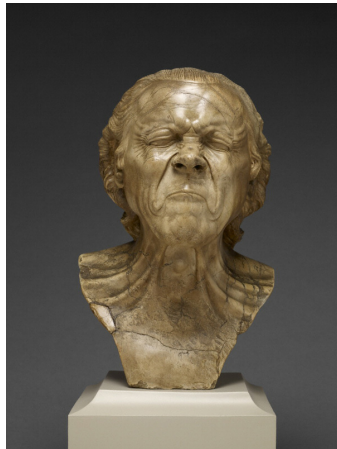
MESSERSCHMIDT AND MODERNITY

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THE GETTY CELEBRATES THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY LEGACY OF
FRANZ XAVER MESSERSCHMIDT'S DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER HEADS

*Exhibition features contemporary artists including Tony Bevan, Tony Cragg,
Ken Gonzales-Day, Bruce Nauman, Pierre Picot, Arnulf Rainer, and Cindy Sherman*



Vexed Man, after 1770. Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (German, 1736–1783). Alabaster. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Self-Portrait after Messerschmidt, 2009. Tony Bevan (British, born 1951). Acrylic and charcoal on canvas. Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice, CA and Ben Brown Fine Arts, London. © Tony Bevan

Messerschmidt and Modernity

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center

July 24–October 14, 2012

LOS ANGELES—The intriguing series of heads that are collectively known as Character Heads, created by the German Baroque artist **Franz Xaver Messerschmidt** (1736–1783) during the last 13 years of his life, have become increasingly popular with the general public through a series of recent exhibitions and books devoted to these expressive works. Furthermore, the sculptures, depicting various states of emotion and expression, have also captured the imaginations of generations of artists—especially during the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Messerschmidt and Modernity, on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum from July 24 through October 14, 2012, is the first exhibition to explore the contemporary legacy of these surprisingly modern-looking sculptures, which were carved in alabaster, or cast in a lead or tin alloy. Along with Messerschmidt's works, the exhibition will feature a selection of modern and contemporary works of art that testify to the lasting impact of these astonishing heads. Eight Character Heads will be exhibited—among them the Getty's own *Vexed Man*— along with a newly discovered reduced variation of a now-lost Character Head known as *A Cheeky Nitpicky Mocker*, which has never before been exhibited publically. Contemporary artists featured in the exhibition include Tony Bevan, Tony Cragg, Ken Gonzales-Day, Bruce Nauman, Pierre Picot, Arnulf Rainer, Cindy Sherman, and Emily Young.

"Messerschmidt's Character Heads have appealed to audiences since they were first produced. They were especially popular in turn-of-the-century Vienna and subsequently inspired modern artists of the 20th century," explains Antonia Boström, senior curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum. "Now, this unparalleled series of sculptures is enjoying a renewed popularity—not only fascinating to museum audiences and scholars, but compelling for contemporary artists."

The exhibition demonstrates how Messerschmidt's heads are linked to the 18th and 19th centuries' fascination with expression and the "passions," as well as with the pseudosciences of physiognomy and pathognomy. It also traces how this series has influenced the work of artists in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and contemporary artists in Austria, Great Britain, and the United States.

Messerschmidt

The German-born Messerschmidt led a successful career in Vienna in the mid-18th century, receiving many important commissions from the Habsburg empress Maria Theresa and her consort, Francis Stephen of Lorraine. Messerschmidt's circumstances changed dramatically around 1770 when he began to show signs of mental instability, leading to the loss of prestigious commissions and conflicts with colleagues and friends. He eventually left Vienna and, in 1777, he settled in Pressburg (now Bratislava), and remained there until his death in 1783, focusing obsessively on the production of the heads as well as more conventional portraits.

Messerschmidt called the dozens of heads he created between 1770 and 1783 *Kopfstücke* (head pieces) and intended them to represent the full range of human expressions,

of which he believed there are sixty-four. In 1793, ten years after his death, the heads were exhibited at the Citizen's Hospital in Vienna, when, despite their misrepresentation, they also received the often incongruous titles by which they are still referred to today. They were only referred to as "Character Heads" after Messerschmidt's death.

Just Rescued from Drowning belongs to a group of alabaster Character Heads probably depicting the same man, but differentiated by the arrangement of the hair. The title suggests that he has just been submerged in water, and his lank hair (or a wig) hangs down over his forehead, but the hairstyle may actually reflect those featured on Gothic sculptures of southern Germany, which would have been familiar to Messerschmidt from his youth.

Another head on view, *The Ill-Humored Man*, belongs to a group of middle-aged bald men within the series of Character Heads. The man's tightly squeezed eyes and the flat strip covering his mouth contribute to a strong sense of alienation and interiority and we sense his extreme discomfort. The object covering the mouth may relate to the magnets that the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) applied to patients during his therapeutic sessions. They formed part of his "animal magnetism" theory that a universal magnetic fluid coursing through the human body could be manipulated by magnets for curative purposes. Mesmer and Messerschmidt were known to be friends and these experimental procedures were of great interest to the artist.

The French artist Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802) was a contemporary of Messerschmidt, and as a painter at the court in Vienna he was probably familiar with his sculpture. Like Messerschmidt, Ducreux was interested in the pseudoscience of physiognomy, and his *Self-Portrait, Yawning* (by 1783, Getty Museum's permanent collection) is an example of his experiments with the expressive possibilities of portraiture.

Some forty-nine of the sixty-nine heads Messerschmidt created are accounted for today. A lithograph on view in the exhibition has been a key element in reconstructing the series of Messerschmidt's heads. Created by Matthias Rudolph Toma after a drawing by Josef



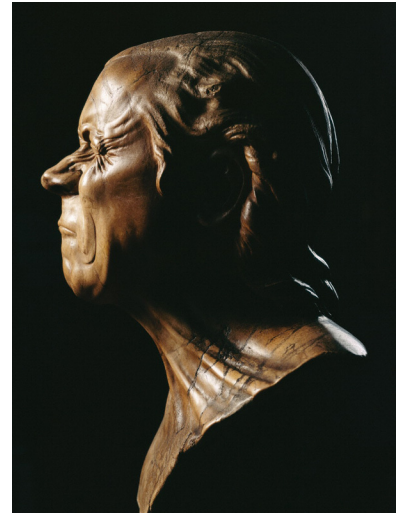
Messerschmidt's 'Character Heads', 1839. Matthias Rudolph Toma (Austrian, 1792–1869). Lithograph. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Hasslwander, this print (from Budapest) depicts forty-nine of the heads and was made four years after the heads were publicly exhibited in 1835 by their then-owner, Josef Jüttner.

The psychological theme of Messerschmidt's sculptures and their uncompromising aesthetic colored their public reception in Vienna. After his death and throughout the early 19th century the Character Heads were viewed as oddities and exhibited in Vienna for popular entertainment. Over time, this perception changed and by the end of the 19th century the heads were seen as useful examples of expression and emotion for art students to copy, and for students of anatomy and psychology to study. Some of the heads found their way into art-school storerooms in Vienna, while others were collected both by preeminent medical professionals and by art collectors. By the turn of the century the Character Heads found favor with Vienna's Jewish cultural elite, which supported avant-garde art movements such as the Viennese Secession and the Wiener Werkstätte, and also had links to Sigmund Freud. Their interests in unconventional contemporary art and the science of psychiatry combined to create a new culture of support for Messerschmidt's heads in Vienna.



Mental Landscape, 2007. Tony Cragg (British, born 1949). Jesmonite. © Tony Cragg (Photo by Charles Duprat)



Untitled (Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, The Vexed Man, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA), 2008. Ken Gonzales-Day (American, born 1964). Light jet print. Courtesy of Ken Gonzales-Day and Fred Torres Collaborations, N.Y.C. © Ken Gonzales-Day

Modernity and Beyond

The works created since 1900 on view in the exhibition represent a wide range of responses to the Character Heads. Modern and contemporary artists have been drawn to Messerschmidt's heads for their perceived departure from the confines of academic convention. But it is also the combination of a reductive style, refined modeling and carving, and exaggerated expression that make these sculptures resonate with modern audiences.

By the early 20th century, Messerschmidt's heads were well known in Vienna, and prized by collectors and artists as distinctive and affecting works of art. Anton Josef Trčka's renowned 1914 portrait photograph of Egon Schiele (1890–1918) reflects the visual and psychological impact of Messerschmidt's grimacing heads. The camera focuses closely on the

artist's head and hands; his anxious expression and interlocked fingers hint at his angst-ridden mood.

Contemporary artists such as Arnulf Rainer (b. 1929) and Tony Bevan (b. 1951) directly quote Messerschmidt's sculptures, while others, including Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) and Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), incorporate their body, human expression, and self-portraiture into their work in a way that prompts comparison with Messerschmidt. The sculptures of Tony Cragg (b. 1949) and Emily Young (b. 1951) are more indirectly related, though the sculptors' grounding in a figurative tradition and their exploration of the material's expressive potential can be paralleled in Messerschmidt's works. The juxtaposition of works from different time periods in this section of the exhibition illustrates the psychological power that Messerschmidt's Character Heads continue to have for the contemporary viewer.

Expression Lab

The final gallery of the exhibition is designed to encourage visitors to consider and respond to Messerschmidt's sculptures and the contemporary works focused on expression. The gallery is installed with mirrors, art reproductions, and an interactive "photo booth" for those who wish to actively explore and record their own facial expressions. For example, Rainer practiced "pulling faces" in the mirror, performing and documenting a series of contorted expressions as a means of investigating his own image. Using mirrors, visitors will be able to try these exercises themselves. In the photo booth, participants will be invited to replicate the intense facial expression of the *Vexed Man* or other character heads, or to invent an expression of their own choosing. Visitors may then share their photo on video screens in the gallery.

A related video will be shown and reference books will be on hand for those who wish to learn more about Messerschmidt and expression, and about the other artists represented in the exhibition.

An audio tour, narrated by Boström and guest contributor Professor Eric Kandel, a Nobel-prize winning neuroscientist and author of *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*, will accompany the exhibition.

Messerschmidt and Modernity will also be accompanied by a richly illustrated book of the same name, written by Antonia Boström and published by Getty Publications.

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