

Friedrich Nicolai: Description of a journey through Germany and Switzerland in the year 1781, Volume IV, Berlin and Stettin 1785, Page 401 ff.:

The most peculiar artist was without a doubt Franz Xaver Messerschmidt¹⁾, who subsequently died in August of 1783 in his 51st year. He was a Schwabian born in Wiesensteig not far from Dillingen. This man was noteworthy as an artist and as a human being. He was a man of uncommon strength in mind and in body. He was an extraordinary genius in his art while his personal life tended to be peculiar, primarily because of his love of independence. He aimed to have few wants, loved nothing but his art and was much accomplished in that. He possessed a vivid imagination and a swift hand with which he made his thoughts come real. He just observed nature and derived his work virtually without other instruction. After going about in several South-German cities he headed for Rome in his 33rd year of life. Here he attracted the attention of all the students that studied there and managed to attain the friendship of the most gifted among them; I learned this from artists who studied there at the same time. His peculiarities were apparent then. The young painters and sculptors that rejoice in the benefit of pensions from the great courts often make a spectacle of themselves. At the monuments, many use a cumbersome apparatus with great difficulty that is often inversely proportional to their talents.

Messerschmidt was exactly the opposite. He lived and dressed like an ordinary citizen. When he began his studies in Rome he bought a trunk of a lime tree and lugged it into the Farnesi Palace where he put it down in front of the Hercules statue. Two Spanish sculptors, living off their courtly pensions, dressed in their fashionable morning negligees while mucking about with their measuring devices and clay models, looked over their shoulders at the German stranger with the shabby clothes and short hair and rather thought him to be a day laborer. Messerschmidt set to work with a few carving knives and whittling the wood this way and that. The other artists watched him and, particularly the Spaniards, shrugged their shoulders, thinking that nothing good can come of such activity. Their mockery soon turned to astonishment when they saw a beautiful Hercules emerge from the unwieldy trunk. The Spaniards, who had never been taught this approach, thought that this must have been accomplished with the help of evil spirits and one of them made utterances to that effect. Messerschmidt, who was always a bit brusque, slapped this man, who was not particularly liked by his fellow students, for making such assertions. Thus Messerschmidt asserted his place with honor, giving him a new status among his peers.

He returned to Vienna where he held a position at the academy teaching sculpture around about 1768. All academies are cesspools of petty squabbles and intrigues. In Vienna, it was customary to bow deeply before the assorted directors and functionaries of the academic senate ²⁾ and to kowtow to them in humble dependence. This was not a good thing for Messerschmidt who did not respect any of his competition as having anywhere near his abilities. He complained bitterly about the many injustices and chicaneries that had been perpetrated on him. I shall not expound on this, however. After a while, Messerschmidt sold all his artwork, drawings, engravings, books and other possessions and moved to Pressburg, where he settled in a suburb named Zuckermändl. ³⁾ He bought a house close to the Danube. He lived, supporting himself mostly with simple works ⁴⁾ that were commissioned from him, a simple existence, with few frills, but a happy one. I found him there, in his isolated house, strong in body and happy in his composure. He came across as an open and uncomplicated character and we soon established a good rapport, especially since I had brought a letter of introduction from an artist whom he had known well while in Rome. His entire furnishings consisted of a bed, a flute, a tobacco-pipe and an Italian book about human proportions. This was all that he wished to keep of all his previous