Bust - The Strong Smell

Object: Bust

Place of origin: Pressburg (made)
Bratislava (Bratislava was formerly known as Pressburg., made)

Date: ca. 1770-June 1781 (made)

Artist/Maker: Messerschmidt, Franz Xaver, born 1736 - died 1783 (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Metal alloy (lead-tin?)

Credit Line: Purchased under the Murray Bequest

Museum number: A.16-1948

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 4, case CA3

Public access description

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt was born in Bavaria, and studied with one of his two sculptor uncles before moving to Vienna. Here he had a successful early career, being given several royal commissions for the Austrian court. His work in 1760s included busts and relief portraits characterised by uncompromising realism.

In 1774 Messerschmidt returned to Wiesensteig, his native Bavarian town, and later to Pozsony, at that time the capital of Hungary (Pressburg in German, now Bratislava, Slovakia). He devoted these years to creating a series of 'character heads' which were completed by June 1781. This fine example belongs to the third group, of bald-headed figures. The heads illustrate different states of mind or reactions to smell. This example is conceivably the original of 'intense odour' but is more likely a variation of 'strong odour'; a man with eyes closed in the act of smelling an unpleasant odour intently. It has also been suggested that the expression is the result of experiencing pain.

It is thought, from a number of contemporary reports, that Messerschmidt was suffering from psychiatric problems, including hallucinations; and perhaps also from a digestive complaint. Perhaps as a distraction, he pinched himself in front of a mirror, contorting his face with extreme expressions which he captured in these busts. Whatever his intentions, Messerschmidt's heads anticipate the interest in psychology and emotional intensity which has interested artists in the following centuries.

The series of heads was greatly admired, and was exhibited during the century after the artist's death until 1889, when it was split up and sold.

Descriptive line
Character head: Strong Smell, cast metal (lead-tin alloy?) by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, German-Austrian, ca. 1770-1781

Dimensions
Height: 48.9 cm without base, Width: 23 cm, Depth: 32 cm

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Object history note
Bought from Mrs M. Burg for £175, using funds from the Murray Bequest, in 1948.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93616/the-strong-smell-bust-messerschmidt-franz-xaver/