

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
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There have always been artists and writers whose output was so prodigious that one can hardly imagine them being in anything but a constant state of creating. As a result, they often become—intentionally or not—synonymous with a whole era. In Germany we talk about the *Dürerzeit* or the *Goethezeit*, and there are also the ages of Rembrandt or Rubens. Yet even without such epithets, eighteenth-century Rome and its ancient ruins are for us today unimaginable without the monumental corpus of Piranesi’s etchings. And what about Menzel, pencil and notebook always at the ready, as observer of Berlin during the city’s ascent to capital of the new (second) *Reich*? Or, in a formally different but conceptually comparable way, Andy Warhol in the waning years of what has been dubbed the “American Century”?



Perhaps the least known of these all-encompassing artistic witnesses of the *Zeitgeist* is Daniel Chodowiecki (1726–1801), a printmaker of Polish-Huguenot descent who was born in Danzig (Gdańsk) and, in 1743, at age seventeen, moved to Berlin, where he would stay for the rest of his life. He started out as a miniature painter but soon made etching his main artistic medium. Over nearly half a century, he produced more than 2,000 prints, which were widely disseminated, admired, and copied. But since the majority were made as illustrations for books, Chodowiecki’s fame remained as contained as the sizes of his illustrations. The prints hardly ever went beyond the octavo format, and, accordingly, he never proclaimed himself any other than a *petit maitre*.

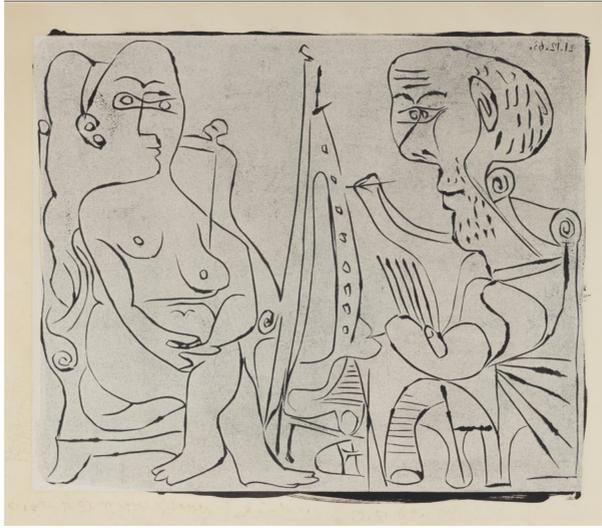
And yet, he is the consummate chronicler not just of Berlin in the second half of the eighteenth century but of German bourgeois life in general during the *Zopfstil* period (which translates literally as “pigtail style,” alluding to the then-fashionable pigtailed wigs worn by men), a time that preceded the onset of *Sturm und Drang* and is roughly congruent with the Louis XVI style in France.

Before embarking on his highly successful career of illustrating almanacs, calendars, and novels, as well as scientific, religious, educational, and historical works, Chodowiecki drew a variety of studies of family members and close friends, who often served as models for his earliest etchings.



One of them is this intriguing sheet from 1758 that shows an artist drawing in his sketchbook in an interior that is populated with six women wearing similar dresses. What kind of room are we looking at here? There are chairs and an open writing desk to the left, but the stone cube the artist uses as his seat is hardly a common accessory in a bourgeois parlor. The draftsman has been identified as the artist himself. His portrait is repeated *en face* in the loosely drawn sketch on the side of that ominous cube above the signature and date, making this print the earliest known self-portrait of Chodowiecki. What appears to be a casual, private gathering becomes more puzzling the closer one looks. Speaking of *Zopfstil*—this young man does not even wear a wig. He appears rather unkempt, wearing slippers and drooping socks that expose quite a bit of his naked leg. The eyes of the woman standing behind him rest on his sketchbook, but all the other ladies have turned away—from the observing artist as well as from us viewers. Whatever they are looking at, and whatever they are occupied with, remains hidden.

It has been suggested that the theme of this enigmatic etching is “the act of drawing” itself, shown without the conventional setting of artist and model. Chodowiecki thereby sets himself apart—consciously or not—from a tradition that starts with images of Saint Luke painting the Virgin and ends with the myriad variations on this theme created in every possible medium by Picasso, whom one must not forget when talking about exuberantly productive *über*-artists.



Pablo Picasso, *Peintre et modèle au fauteuil*, 1963, linocut (Baer 1347)

Chodowiecki @ C.G. Boerner

Picasso @ John Szoke Gallery



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