



# Messerschmidt and Modernity

*Antonia Bostrom*

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An astonishing group of sixty-nine “Character Heads” by German sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783) has fascinated viewers, artists, and collectors for more than two centuries. The heads, carved in alabaster or cast in lead or tin alloy, were conceived outside the norm of conventional portrait sculpture and explore the furthest limits of human expression. Since their first exposure to the public in 1793, artists, including Egon Schiele (1890–1918), Francis Bacon (1909–1992), Arnulf Rainer (born 1929), and, more recently, Tony Cragg (born 1949) and Tony Bevan (born 1951), have responded to their overwhelming visual power.

Lavishly illustrated, *Messerschmidt and Modernity* presents remarkable works created by and inspired by Messerschmidt, an artist both of and ahead of his time. The Character Heads situate the artist's work squarely within the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, with its focus on expression and emotion. Yet their uncompromising style stands in sharp contrast to the florid Baroque style of Messerschmidt's earlier sculptures for the court of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. With their strict frontality and narrow silhouettes, the Character Heads appear to contemporary eyes as having been conceived in a “modern” aesthetic. Their position at the apparent limits of rational art have made them compelling to successive generations of artists working in a variety of media.

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