

MESSERSCHMIDT, THE GRIMACE OF MADNESS

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Messerschmidt 's home-studio

Johanna, an elderly waitress, enters, followed by another woman. Franz Xaver is busy sculpting.

THERESE – *(entering timidly)* Are you the sculptor?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, I am Franz Xaver Messerschmidt . How did you get in? Who opened the door for you?

JOHANNA – *(showing the keys)* Obviously someone who has the keys to the house.

MESSERSCHMIDT – The only one who has the keys is my brother Johan Adam.

JOHANNA – It was him who gave them to me, Franz Xaver .

MESSERSCHMIDT – How is that possible?

JOHANNA – It wasn't difficult. All I had to do was offer him a bottle of my juniper grappa.

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(rudely)* Get out! I'm not seeing anyone! *(continues carving)*

JOHANNA - *(to Therese)* Don't be scared, ma'am. He's crazy, but he's harmless. Every now and then I come to clean his room and bring him something to eat. If he doesn't open the door, I leave the plate in front of the door. When he's working on one of his " koepke " he's in ecstasy and is capable of going without food for a whole week. *(laughs)*

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(screams)* Go away! *(continues carving)*

JOHANNA – Franz, don't be so rude and ill-mannered with this lady! It was your brother. Johan Adam wanted me to accompany him: last time you kicked him out of the house in a rude way.

MESSERSCHMIDT – That coward had secretly taken possession of one of my “ koepfe ” to sell it to an art dealer! *(continues sculpting)*

JOHANNA – Franz, you are a real misanthrope.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Everyone's worried because I live like a hermit and don't want to see anyone. Let me work in peace!

JOHANNA – Madam, I remind you that you promised me 10 crowns if I accompanied you to the sculptor's house.

THERESE - Of course, Johanna. (*Hands her a coin*)

JOHANNA – (*after biting the coin to check if it is good*) Thank you, madam.

MESSERSCHMIDT - Johanna, who authorized you to accompany her here?

JOHANNA - You live in a remote house and she would never have gotten there on her own.

MESSERSCHMIDT - Why did you let her in?

JOHANNA – Come on, don't act like a wild bear, the lady wants to meet you.

THERESE – Yes, I just wanted to ask you a few questions.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*snorting, still inhospitable*) Anyway, Who are you and what do you want from me?

THERESE – I've heard so much about you and I came to visit you.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I repeat, I'm not seeing anyone. Go away!

THERESE – Just a moment. I'm an admirer of yours, Maestro. You certainly don't remember me, but as a girl I was one of your students at the Vienna Academy.

MESSERSCHMIDT – A female student? All my students were male; I don't recall ever teaching females to sculpt.

THERESE – It's true, everyone knew me as Theo.

JOHANNA - (*laughing*) You mean to say that in order to attend his lessons...

THERESE – Yes, I was forced to dress up as a man.

JOHANNA – Really? (*laughing*) This one!

THERESE – Messerschmidt , I must also confess a little secret to you. As a girl, I was secretly infatuated with you.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*annoyed*) What? I've never loved any woman. Now I have to say goodbye.

THERESE – It was just the platonic love of a young girl, nothing more. I'd like to write something about you, about your life as an artist. It's an idea that excites me.

JOHANNA – Are you a writer?

MESSERSCHMIDT – When did anyone ever show interest in me after I left Vienna? Confess, was it my brother Johan Adam who brought you here?

THERESE – (*liar*) No... but I know him and I've stopped to talk to him a few times.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Madam, (*annoyed*) I have no time to waste.

THERESE – I promise I won't bother you for long. You know? I've come a long way to find you. (*Begging*) Just a moment, please.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I have never told anyone about myself, and I certainly won't tell a woman about myself.

JOHANNA - He has always lived among men...

MESSERSCHMIDT - And I confess that I feel a certain repulsion for the female world.

THERESE – It's impossible for an artist of your talent not to frequent women.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*suddenly sweet*) The only woman I remember fondly is my mother. She left me too soon. I was still a child.

JOHANNA – Perhaps your aversion to women stems precisely from this early absence. (*to Therese*) There's only this stool here. He never receives guests.

THERESE – (*sits down*) When were you born?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Am I wrong, or have you already started asking me questions?

THERESE – Excuse me.

MESSERSCHMIDT – All right, you win. I was born on February 6, 1736. at Wiesensteig .

THERESE – (*takes notes*) I don't know this country.

JOHANNA – It is a small town in the Swabian Alps, in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria.

MESSERSCHMIDT - I am the son of a large family of modest artisans: my parents were dyers and tanners.

JOHANNA – Her brother Adam told me that they spent their childhood in Munich.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, but in 1752, at the age of sixteen, I began my apprenticeship with my maternal uncles in Graz.

JOHANNA – You know? Uncle Johann Baptist Straub was a sculptor of some calibre and was his first teacher.

THERESE – So it was in the capital of Styria that you completed your first artistic studies, immediately demonstrating considerable talent?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes. Later, in 1755, I enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, then directed by the court painter Marteen van Meytens who took me under his wing.

THERESE – *(continues taking notes)* Who were your teachers?

MESSERSCHMIDT – I studied the art of sculpture with Georg Raphael Donner, Balthasar Ferdinand Moll, but above all under Jakob Christoph Schletterer.

THERESE – Your great qualities as a sculptor certainly will not have gone unnoticed in the sophisticated Viennese environment.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Indeed. Almost immediately, the first imperial commissions and those of the high nobility began to pour in.

JOHANNA - In 1760 he was appointed court sculptor in the service of the Viennese nobility.

MESSERSCHMIDT – And thanks to van Meytens , my patron, I obtained my first important commission: the creation of the bronze busts of Empress Maria Theresa and her husband Francis I of Habsburg-Lorraine for the halls of the Arsenal.

THERESE – I heard that your enlightened art later also pleased Frederick the Great.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, some of my works are in fact found in Potsdam and Berlin .

THERESE – I noticed that your early sculptural portraits emphasize the magnificent appearance of the subjects.

MESSERSCHMIDT – But then I wanted to adapt the traditional Baroque portrait to incorporate the more natural poses and relaxed drapery of the late Rococo. Am I wrong, or did you promise to ask me only a few questions? This is turning into a real interrogation.

THERESE – Excuse me, Franz Xaver , but you have no idea how long I've been waiting for this moment. I've been dreaming of meeting you for a long time.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Let's get on with the other questions quickly, though.

THERESE – Then you continued your studies in Paris and London.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I see you are well informed, madam...

THERESE – Therese . My name is Therese .

MESSERSCHMIDT – That's my mother's name... *(more available)* Go ahead.

JOHANNA - *(hands her a glass)* A beer?

THERESE – No thanks, I'd just like a glass of water.

JOHANNA – You're a woman of few expenses. *(He pours her some water into a glass.)*

THERESE – *(after taking a sip of water)* Thank you, Johanna. *(resumes taking notes in a notebook)*
Later, in 1765 you went to Rome, the *communis homeland* of artists.

MESSERSCHMIDT – It was only a short study trip. I soon returned to Vienna and immediately resumed my work as a sculptor at court. From 1768 to 1770 I executed a series of portraits of members of the Viennese Enlightenment circles that radically broke with the traditional portrait type.

THERESE – Neoclassical portraits in which your rebellious genius stripped away the baroque drapery and rococo ease, as if they were frivolous accessories.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Do you see this? *(wears a hat)* I always wear a simple hat in public, in an age when everyone wears self-glorifying wigs.

THERESE – Confirming your rebellious nonconformism. *(A knock at the door.)*

MESSERSCHMIDT – Who could it be? I'm not waiting for anyone.

JOHANNA – *(at the door)* It's someone who's waiting outside in the carriage and who followed us here.

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(suspicious again)* Madam, who accompanied you here? You lied to me!

VOICE – Come out, Franz!

JOHANNA – Don't worry, he's your brother: he preferred that we go in first.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Where are you, Adam? Come forward, you coward.

VOICE – Come on, Franz! What are you waiting for?

JOHANNA – It was your brother who insisted Therese come visit you. He's very concerned about your health. He wants me to take you to a doctor to check you out.

MESSERSCHMIDT – And why should I go to the doctor? *(Balancing on one leg)* You see? I'm perfectly fine. It's just a show! You've actually come to arrest me!

THERESE – *(laughing)* No, Franz Xaver , no one wants to hurt you, much less take you to prison. We just want to help you.

JOHANNA - Believe me, it's better if you open that door and walk out.

MESSERSCHMIDT – All right, I'm ready. *(He stretches out his arms, crossing his wrists.)* Let the gendarmes come in and put the irons on my wrists. *(darkness)*

SECOND SCENE : doctor's office

(The psychiatrist is writing, sitting behind his desk.)

JOHANNA – *(entering)* Have you seen Franz? No one imprisoned you, nor does anyone mean to harm you. Your brother is just very worried about your health. For months now, you've been holed up in a room, and you won't let anyone in.

PSYCHIATRIST: Don't be afraid. I just want to examine you. *(At first hesitant, Messerschmidt sits down.)*

JOHANNA – Relax. You'll have a nice chat with the doctor and then you can go home to your sculptures.

Therese enters the scene : she is wearing a lab coat.

MESSERSCHMIDT – You here too? *(irritated)* A writer, right?

THERESE – I'm actually a nurse, but I'm also a fan of yours. Your brother and Johanna confided in me that they often have to leave food outside your door.

JOHANNA - Because sometimes he doesn't let us into his house. *(inviting him to sit down for the visit)* Come on, Franz.

PSYCHIATRIST - Therese , how did you find the sculptor's lonely little house by the Danube?

JOHANNA – *(interrupting)* It is furnished only with a bed, a flute, a pipe, a jug and an old Italian book on body proportions.

THERESE – I noticed that in one window there was also a drawing of an armless Egyptian statue, which he looked at with admiration, but at the same time with fear.

(Messerschmidt takes off his jacket and the doctor begins the examination.)

PSYCHIATRIST – Franz Xaver Messerschmidt with your numerous portraits of Viennese aristocrats and intellectuals, all characterized by a sober elegance...

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(clarifying)* But absolutely free from any decorative excess...

PSYCHIATRIST – I was saying... With those portraits you were one of the first German artists – and the first sculptor – to turn to neoclassicism.

THERESE - Yes, neoclassicism has now become the reigning style.

JOHANNA – *(intervening)* It seemed like the beginning of a brilliant academic career, studded with successes, but unfortunately it didn't go that way... *(he taps his temple)*

PSYCHIATRIST – *(annoyed)* Madam, would you like to let the teacher answer?

JOHANNA – *(offended)* All right, Doctor. I'll shut up and that's it. *(She walks away.)*

PSYCHIATRIST - My dear Messerschmidt , I know you were very successful as an artist until your, shall we say, "emotional crisis." The most disconcerting aspect, however, is that as a sculptor you created your original character heads...

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(correcting)* I call them “ charakterkopfe ” or more simply “ koepfe ”.

PSYCHIATRIST – Of course. We were saying that in addition to your “ koepfe ,” with their demonic grimaces, thanks to which you quickly earned a reputation as a nonconformist, you also continued to produce a plastic art production that was, let's say, “normal,” completely conventional.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, at the same time I sculpted portraits of some important Viennese men of letters and intellectuals, marked however by a marked turn towards neoclassicism.

PSYCHIATRIST – Explain yourself better.

MESSERSCHMIDT – This, let's say, abrupt and decisive change of mine with respect to the tastes of the time, can be seen in the approach of my sculptures, in the subtle tendency towards abstraction.

THERESE – And in the renunciation of any superfluous decorative elements, like the bust on which the head rests. I appreciate all your works, especially the more recent and original ones.

JOHANNA – Original? Those bald heads with absurd and ridiculous grimaces are simply repulsive.

PSYCHIATRIST – *(annoyed)* You were not asked for your artistic opinion on the sculptor's works.

JOHANNA – *(putting her crossed fingers to her mouth)* Excuse me, I won't talk anymore. I promise.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I simply wanted to point out that the body is irrelevant to the person. In my "illuminated" neoclassical sculptures, only the face matters, which I wanted to present with "rigorous frontality": the head is not turned to one side or the other, but is always fixed in a frontal pose.

THERESE – When I came to visit you, I was truly struck by the “reductive” austerity of these masterpieces of yours, with which you have earned your reputation as an innovator and virtuoso.

JOHANNA – *(in a low voice)* Innovative and virtuous. To me, he's just a madman, a demented nutcase who's lost his mind... *(She takes a sip of liquor from a small bottle she keeps in her pocket.)*

MESSERSCHMIDT – I was later accepted as a member of the Academy of Fine Arts and was appointed adjunct professor at the Vienna Academy from 1769 to 1773. My success also allowed me to buy a beautiful house.

PSYCHIATRIST - But despite your fame, you began to suffer from some problems.

JOHANNA – *(entering)* His brother Adam told me that as early as 1770, he had had moments of mental instability.

PSYCHIATRIST – *(giving her a dirty look)* An “emotional crisis” perhaps due to a strong emotion.

THERESE – What you, doctor, call an “emotional crisis” proved to be very fruitful artistically, because it led him to produce some truly revolutionary sculptures.

JOHANNA - A certain mental confusion and an “unhealthy” imagination are evident in the heads that Franz created after what you call a “crisis,” but which to me is simply madness.

PSYCHIATRIST – I repeat, I want to listen to the sculptor, not his servant. *(Johanna sits down, offended.)*

THERESE - No great mind ever existed without a touch of madness.

MESSERSCHMIDT – By 1771 my art commissions had dried up.

PSYCHIATRIST - Because there had been widespread whispers about your sanity.

MESSERSCHMIDT – So you think I'm a paranoid lunatic? Your normality is just a lack of imagination, a lack of creativity. Madness is a blessing for art! It's not me who's crazy, but you all are too normal!

PSYCHIATRIST – It's true: all the best people are a little crazy. Madness is something that only a few people can understand.

THERESE - Normality is just a mask, a pose. Madness is the true face of man .

PSYCHIATRIST – It can happen that the first demons of madness appear in the mind of a famous artist destined for a successful career.

MESSRSCHMIDT – Of course. The artist tries to concentrate on the work he's started, but his mind instead follows paths that lead far away...

THERESE - That there is an element of irrationality in art is undeniable, but the "vein of madness" can also become an added value in an artist's production.

PSYCHIATRIST – Therese , I remind you, however, that due to the appearance of the first symptoms of a... let's say... “mental instability”, in 1774 Messerschmidt was refused the post of titular professor, which went to a rival of his.

MESSERSCHMIDT – After the death of my teacher, the sculptor Jakob Christoph Schletterer, I was offered the opportunity to become a professor and take over his chair, but, to my great disappointment, I was not appointed the new head of the sculpture department at the Vienna Academy .

THERESE – Something broke and your professorship was revoked?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, I was rejected.

PSYCHIATRIST – Precisely because of the evident signs of mental imbalance shown in previous periods.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Mental imbalance? That's a lie!

JOHANNA – *(in a low voice)* It's clear. They realized he was crazy as a horse... The craziest people think they're normal.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I was entitled to a professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts , but it was denied me!

PSYCHIATRIST - There is a document which is the first testimony in which it is mentioned that you, the sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt , you did indeed suffer from mental disorders.

MESSERSCHMIDT – It's all just slander!

THERESE – I myself managed to find the written reason for this refusal. The speaker is Austrian Prime Minister Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg . *(He reads)* “Whether due to poverty or a natural predisposition, this man has suffered for the past three years from a certain mental confusion, which, although it has now eased, allowing him to work as before, nevertheless manifests itself from time to time in not entirely normal imaginations.”

MESSERSCHMIDT – These words have deeply offended me! I have suffered too much harassment and injustice! This supposed “ mental insanity ” of mine is nothing but a colossal lie!

THERESE – It is also true that if madness overcomes the barriers of reason it can become genius .

MESSERSCHMIDT - God gave man the reason to reach his limits, and a pinch of madness to overcome them.

THERESE - Madness lives in the brain, but is born in the soul , my dear Messerschmidt .

JOHANNA – *(in a low voice)* I say that to lose your mind, you have to have one. And this one... *(to the psychiatrist)* Doctor, isn't madness a contagious disease?

THERESE – Johanna! Maestro, I understand your disappointment at not being awarded this prestigious position.

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(screaming)* I was the victim of a plot by my rivals!

PSYCHIATRIST – Calm down, Messerschmidt . Therese , go get a sedative.

THERESE – Right away, doctor. *(Pour the medicine powder into a glass of water.)*

PSYCHIATRIST - Kaunitzh had thought of offering you a pension, a lifetime annuity as thanks for all the splendid works you had done for the court of Habsburg-Lorraine.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I refused this gesture of charity, I didn't need that money !

JOHANNA – Give up the money? I told you that one was out of line!

Messerschmidt 's delusions must have contributed to driving him mad.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I sold my house and all my works of art, drawings, engravings, books and other possessions. I took with me only the first five “ koepfe ” that I had made around 1770.

JOHANNA – Your brother told me that on May 8, 1775, you left Vienna forever.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes. Comforted and disappointed, I returned to Wiesensteig , my hometown in Bavaria. My throat is dry. Could I have a glass of water?

PSYCHIATRIST – Therese , give the master something to drink. *(She speaks softly, while Messerschmidt has moved away to drink from the glass the woman has brought him.)* His madness proved strangely liberating. He left cosmopolitan Vienna for his provincial hometown and began making art as crazy as he was. What do you think, Johanna?

JOHANNA – Doctor, for me madness is an abstract work in which the artist puts what he feels and everyone sees in it what they want.

PSYCHIATRIST - *(loudly addressing Messerschmidt who has come closer again)* Are you feeling better?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, thank you. When I returned to my birthplace, I was reborn as an artist and devoted myself completely to the creation of my “ koepfe ” . Afterwards I lived for a couple of years in Munich.

PSYCHIATRIST – You were hoping to get some position at that court, but it didn't go that way .

MESSERSCHMIDT – And to think that only a decade earlier, I was an artist at the heart of Viennese high society, poised to become a professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts. I received commissions from the Austrian nobility, from Enlightenment intellectuals, and from Empress Maria Theresa herself.

JOHANNA – He was once the most eminent sculptor in Vienna.

MESSERSCHMIDT – At first I retreated into a sort of artistic exile, living alone in a cabin in the Swabian Alps...

JOHANNA - L or Schwäbischer Jura ...

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, a mountain range in Baden -Württemberg , Germany. Later, in 1777, I moved to Pressburg , the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary, with my brother.

JOHANNA – A city with many names: Pressburg in German, Pozsony in Hungarian, and Prespork in Slovak.

THERESE - Your presence here as a sculptor who had worked at the imperial court certainly must not have gone unnoticed.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I settled in a suburb called Zuckermanndl . I bought a house near the Danube and lived a simple, uncluttered, but happy life. I supported myself mostly by creating simple commissions. I also resumed my work as a portrait painter, creating, among other things, a series of small alabaster medallions.

THERESE – Your brother told me that many visitors have come to Pressburg , trying to contact you, but without success.

JOHANNA - He continued to live a hermit's existence, like a famous recluse, dedicating himself mainly to his series of heads, most of them bald like him.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*agitated again*) They're called " koepfe ," Johanna. Yes, I had already made twelve more in 1777. I made most of my busts in pewter, some in marble and alabaster, and only one in wood.

PSYCHIATRIST – So, this exile of yours ultimately turned out to be a creative opportunity.

MESSERSCHMIDT – I was resigned to the social mistreatment to which I had been subjected.

PSYCHIATRIST - But your unconscious hadn't given up.

MESSERSCHMIDT - All the instincts I had denied while teaching in Vienna now demanded to be seen through my art, albeit in demonic form, which made them more insistent and terrifying than ever.

PSYCHIATRIST - You could no longer fire them, just as you had been fired by the company.

MESSERSCHMIDT - It was their constant presence that freed my art from the straitjacket of impersonal neoclassicism.

PSYCHIATRIST – In your “ koepfe ”, you have thus represented exaggerated and exasperated expressions, associated with the different states of mind.

MESSERSCHMIDT – No, I wasn't interested in representing moods, but rather the changing relationships of facial muscles in the performance of different functions.

THERESE - Yet in your busts there appears the irruption of an intimate feeling that cannot be held back.

PSYCHIATRIST - In some " koepfe " you have tried to represent some immediately understandable personality trait, while in others you have changed the expression by exaggerating it into a grimace.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Demons haunted me, especially at night.

JOHANNA – (*ironic*) The demons tempted him as St. Anthony was tempted...

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, because, like a saint, I have "always lived in chastity." Sexuality only reaches me in a fantastic form. (*possessed*) "A man must completely hide the redness of his lips" because "the lips are the symbol of sexual impulses."

THERESE – Should this, doctor, perhaps be interpreted as a difficulty in your relationships with women? (*The doctor nods and she takes notes.*)

JOHANNA – (*makes an eloquent gesture*) That guy's cucumber won't lift anymore (clapping)...

MESSERSCHMIDT – I envy animals, who have "vast advantages over man," because "they know and sense many things in nature that are hidden from man."

THERESE – My dear Messerschmidt , you are often as instinctive as an animal.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Sometimes I wish I were an animal.

PSYCHIATRIST - It is clear that he sacrificed his instincts—his animal sexuality and aggression—when he moved away from the early Baroque and Rococo style, in which instincts were materially elaborated, and developed his neoclassicism, with its revolutionary austerity.

JOHANNA – (*snorting*) Ugh! So much talk just to say he'd become impotent.

PSYCHIATRIST – My dear Franz Xaver , you have poured your psychic anguish into your male torsos. But have you managed to keep your inner demons at bay?

MESSERSCHMIDT – It was hard, but I did it. (*altered*) The demon of proportion is envious of me, of my skill, and torments me when I'm working on my " koepfe . " And so, to control the demon, I pinch myself especially on the right side, right here under the ribs.

PSYCHIATRIST – Thus, the propitiatory power of the grimace seems to repel or intimidate demons.

MESSERSCHMIDT – That's right, doctor.

PSYCHIATRIST – (*unconvinced*) So the demons would be chasing you and hunting you.

MESSERSCHMIDT – A demonic spirit, jealous of my perfection in rendering sculptural proportions, torments me with real physical harassment.

PSYCHIATRIST – In your brain fever or madness, your thoughts have sailed many seas. And have you found in art a valid remedy to defeat the demon?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, I go to the mirror, pinch myself very hard in the side, and immediately retract the grimace that follows. *(He lowers his head, very pained.)*

PSYCHIATRIST – *(in a low voice)* The shocking thing is that his famous "physiognomic busts" almost all have only one model.

JOHANNA – *(aside)* His bald head...

THERESE – The German writer Friedrich Nicolai was one of the lucky few who in 1781 had the chance to meet the artist in Pressburg , today Bratislava, in his solitary retreat.

PSYCHIATRIST - *(showing a book)* He reported the account of the meeting in this work, *Description of the journey to Germany and Switzerland* .

THERESE – How did you spend your time in Pressburg , Messerschmidt ?

MESSERSCHMIDT – My only company were those sixty of my creatures.

THERESE – Those busts in alabaster or dull grey metal that you call “ koepfe ” .

PSYCHIATRIST – Nicolai writes *(read)* “Four of these were 'truly admirable masterpieces,' self-portraits 'conforming to nature.' Two were his favorites: one showed the artist laughing so heartily that his teeth, palate, and tongue were visible 'down to the root'; the other showed him 'very serious in the old-fashioned way.'”

THERESE – When I visited her house, I found all those busts cast in metal or carved from alabaster simply disturbing. Smiling, with bizarre or grotesque grimaces, sometimes ridiculous or with disgusted expressions.

PSYCHIATRIST - Your character studies are truly unimaginable for neoclassical rigor!

THERESE – Her sculptures do not adhere to any classical ideal of beauty.

JOHANNA – *(softly)* Because they're really ugly!

MESSERSCHMIDT – I must admit that the quality of my “ koepfe ” is not always consistent.

THERESE - Some busts do not go beyond the limits of simple expressive deformation, but others instead reach the heights of artistic value.

PSYCHIATRIST – Dear Franz Xaver , I see that you are a man of fervent passions, but I am told that you have a great passion above all for solitude.

MESSERSCHMIDT - I live only for my art, and I must admit that I am very ignorant in all things that have no relation to it.

PSYCHIATRIST – Are there perhaps any analogies between your character heads... (*corrects himself*) “ koepfe ” and other busts created in the same period by other artists?

MESSERSCHMIDT – My creatures are unlike any other sculpture I have ever made.

PSYCHIATRIST – Therese told me that some of your busts are extremely naturalistic. They communicate extreme states of mind: laughter, sadness.

MESSERSCHMIDT - Anger, anguish...

PSYCHIATRIST - And a catatonic void. (*The two sit down.*)

JOHANNA – Doctor, I secretly followed the execution of some busts.

MESSERSCHMIDT – How could you, you wretch!

JOHANNA – I'd holed up in the closet. Every half minute she'd look at herself in the mirror and, with the utmost precision, make the grimace she needed: bulging eyes, furrowed brows, pursed lips, tense neck muscles.

THERESE - Some “ koepfe ” have a chin and neck that press deeply downwards as if trying to withdraw between the collarbones.

JOHANNA - Others stretch upward until the tendons tighten and seem to snap.

MESSERSCHMIDT – They all carry expressions as extreme as they are inscrutable.

THERESE - Every wrinkle is drawn with unnatural precision and depth.

MESSERSCHMIDT – To create an effect that is both hyperrealistic and absolutely unreal.

PSYCHIATRIST – How many heads have you sculpted?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Fifty-four of these heads will be part of a still-unfinished project, with which I intend to capture the "sixty-four variations on the grimaces" of the human face. They represent "the supernatural senses of animals." Once completed, the group will form an "auspicious" system to ward off an evil that is haunting me. These heads have a magical function: that of keeping evil spirits away.

JOHANNA – Franz looks at his heads with the utmost satisfaction, but I noticed that two of them, which stand out within the series , he only looks at for a few moments, his eyes fixed , then immediately turns his head to one side. The two busts have faces protruded forward, their features protruding, and their lips resemble a bird's beak.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*puts his head in his hands*) Those are the images of an apparition that comes to torture me at night.

PSYCHIATRIST – Nicolai also writes (*reads*): “The two beaked heads are the most enigmatic of the artist's busts. Messerschmidt had a very particular relationship with these. He was very distressed by them and kept them separate from the others.”

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*obsessed*) That apparition appears to me at night. He pinched me, and I pinched him in return, until the evil spirits came out.

PSYCHIATRIST – Nicolai states in his book that these are precisely the images of the spirit of proportion. He described the second of the beaked heads in a shocking way . (*reads while Messerschmidt does as described*) “ Imagine that all the bones and muscles of a human face have been crushed together and then pulled forward so that the face takes on the shape of a beak without losing its human features. I saw him rest his eyes motionless for a moment on these busts and then quickly turn his head away. Then I cautiously asked him what they represented. His eyes became glassy as he answered me with rapid words.” (*Lighting changes for a flashback in which Messerschmidt recalls that encounter*)

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*dazed*) That demon, the 'Spirit of Proportions,' pinched me, and then I pinched the demon. And these figures are the result. (*He stands in front of the mirror and pinches himself under the right ribs.*)

PSYCHIATRIST – (*reads, exaggerating the words*) “As Messerschmidt 's neck lengthened, its tendons formed taut lines that gradually merged into the upper chest, exaggerated, but recognizable. He thrust his chin up and forward, and the same tendons appeared, along with that smooth, fat wrinkle that ran around the back of the neck. The same realism appeared in the tightly closed eyes. But then the rest of the face, with its parallel lines etched into the cheeks, and the inhuman protrusion of the 'beak,' belonged to impossibility.”

JOHANNA – (*pointing to the psychiatrist*) He seemed “sane,” but he too keeps his madness under lock and key. Good heavens! The doctor 's crazy too!

PSYCHIATRIST – (*thinking aloud*) When Messerschmidt sculpts those pursed lips, he portrays them as a rejection of intimacy. The muscles around the mouth represent for the artist "a chastity belt." In the lips of the beaked heads, so distended forward, we can identify another reason for his sexual obsession.

MESSERSCHMIDT – (*panting*) You disgusting demon, I will subdue you! (*exhausted*) I almost died from the effort.

THERESE - From his words we could deduce that those caricatures of human faces are in reality the figures in which his hallucinated imagination saw the demons of proportion.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Proportion, divine proportion, is a secret of God!

THERESE - There's great tension in the struggle to achieve it. The artist is making a great effort; he's violating a celestial prohibition.

PSYCHIATRIST – According to Nicolai, “Prometheus' rebellion emerges in projective form in his delirium.”

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(screams)* Yes, I, the rebel Franz Xaver Messerschmidt , I am persecuted by God! *(bursts into tears, kneeling down)*

PSYCHIATRIST – *(reads)* “After examining the sculpture of that beaked head for a long time, in profile it might wear a caricature-like sarcastic smile; while the frontal view might be that of a face crumpled for a kiss.” But both cannot make sense at the same time.

THERESE – *(in a low voice)* Doctor, Messerschmidt 's claim that he was pinched by the spirit is starting to make sense.

PSYCHIATRIST – I wanted to ask you something, Messerschmidt . When you lived in Vienna, did you perhaps come across people who claimed secret knowledge, you know... supernatural powers?

MESSERSCHMIDT - In 1770, at the height of my career, I had purchased a house in the Landstrasse suburb , and had entered the orbit of one of the area's most famous residents: Franz Anton Mesmer . I immediately wanted to immortalize my new neighbor with a bust in the neoclassical style befitting his dignity as a physician and philosopher. I had depicted him majestically, a little plump, but benignly. He was the founder of one of the most famous theories: animal magnetism.

PSYCHIATRIST – I understand! His heads must therefore be related to the theories of the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer , a friend of the artist and founder of mesmerism, a movement similar to hypnosis.

MESSERSCHMIDT – my friend Mesmer maintains that man is governed by magnetic forces.

PSYCHIATRIST - According to this hypothesis, the facial contortions of the busts would be the result of his interest in magnetic forces.

MESSERSCHMIDT - In 1766 Anton Mesmer had published a theory on the interaction between organic and cosmic bodies, entitled “On the Influence of the Planets on the Human Body”, elaborating his magnetic doctrine.

PSYCHIATRIST – I am well acquainted with the theories of Mesmer , Franz Xaver . He maintains that a universal, intangible fluid permeates all things, transmitting forces between them, so that influences can pass from one 'organized body' to another.

MESSERSCHMIDT - According to him, these influences also include the tidal effects of the planets on humans, but also the less obvious ones on humans and other organisms. *(He faintly)* My head is spinning, can I step outside for a moment?

JOHANNA – Of course, you're not in prison. I'll take you for some fresh air. *(The psychiatrist nods and she exits with Messerschmidt .)*

PSYCHIATRIST – *(left alone with Therese)* If it is clear that Anton Mesmer influenced him with his theory of animal magnetism, the busts could perhaps also have been intended as studies in

physiognomy linked to the theories of the Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater , according to which a person's character could be deduced from physical appearance.

Mesmer 's house and garden on Landstrasse had become a hub for Vienna's intellectual and artistic society. Right there, near a fountain Messerschmidt himself had sculpted for him, concerts by Haydn, Gluck , and the young Mozart were held .

PSYCHIATRIST - According to Anton Mesmer , a healthy body is permeable to the magnetic fluid, which can flow uninterrupted through its poles; a sick body, on the other hand, provides an impediment, which is itself the disease, but which can nevertheless be cured.

THERESE – What you're telling me is really interesting, continue, doctor.

PSYCHIATRIST - After his séances, many of those receiving his "treatments" suffered "magnetic seizures": contagious convulsions and seizures, profound catatonic states, and often wild facial contortions. They were as if hypnotized.

THERESE – What did Messner’s so-called “cures” consist of?

PSYCHIATRIST - They ranged from relieving colic to making blindness less severe, and even when total rehabilitation had not been achieved, something was clearly happening.

THERESE – It is not clear to me whether the theory that Anton Mesmer has developed is actually a deliberate fraud or whether he is sincerely convinced of his powers.

PSYCHIATRIST – Many of his patients, perhaps only due to a placebo effect of autosuggestion from the supposed “magnetism”, have actually found relief from their problems, at least temporarily.

(Messerschmidt returns with Johanna)

THERESE – Are you feeling better?

MESRSCHMIDT – Yes, thank you. The fresh air did me good.

PSYCHIATRIST – Excuse me, I'd like to ask you a question: have you ever had contact with invisible spirits?

MESSERSCHMIDT - I have always believed in the existence of spirits, and I attribute this ability to my chastity, since only pure people like me can see the invisible.

PSYCHIATRIST – So you claim to be haunted by demons.

THERESE – Haven’t you had any problems with women?

JOHANNA – Of course! His...

THERESE – *(puts a hand over her mouth)* Johanna!

JOHANNA – Oh, everyone here is crazy! *(Takes a sip from the bottle)*

THERESE – Maybe you've been the victim of some serious disappointment in love?

MESSERSCHMIDT - My chastity is precisely the cause of my demonic visions. I have never lost my virginity!

THERESE – I cannot understand why you, who live such an ascetic life of celibacy, have to endure such torture from the spirits.

PSYCHIATRIST - Tell me, what do these "spirits" look like to you?

MESSERSCHMIDT – They're particularly insolent and constantly annoy me. The most annoying thing is the spirit of proportion, which wakes me up at night, scares me, and torments me.

PSYCHIATRIST – But what is the reason for this hatred of the demon towards you as an artist?

MESSERSCHMIDT – You know, I've developed a brilliant theory of proportion. (*He becomes mysterious.*) I want to reveal to you some unspeakable secrets. The demon of proportion causes me severe pain in my lower abdomen. (*Johanna's suggestive gesture.*)

PSYCHIATRIST – And when does this happen?

MESSERSCHMIDT - While I sculpt the face of the bust.

PSYCHIATRIST – So you have a strong connection between sexual impulse and artistic production. I've heard about this theory of yours before, which seems rather intricate. What is it based on?

MESSERSCHMIDT – On the Egyptian *Hermes* .

THERESE – The Egyptian Hermes?

PSYCHIATRIST – My dear, perhaps Franz Xaver To create his “ koepeke ”, Messerschmidt may have also drawn on Egyptian-style hermeticism and on the many theories of proportion that take man as the measure of the universe.

THERESE – Doctor, nowadays quackery and magical thinking are often indistinguishable from science.

JOHANNA – It all seems like nonsense to me. I'm afraid your "treatments" will cause poor Franz more harm than good. I bid you farewell and go home. (Exits)

MESSERSCHMIDT - The true secret of proportion lies precisely in the proportions of Egyptian statuary, like that drawing hanging near my window. It is the cumulative result of observing different parts of different statues.

THERESE – But the proportions in that drawing are the normal ones of all human forms.

MESSERSCHMIDT - I imagine that the proportions found on a human head mirror the proportions of the entire body. (*Damned*) Mysterious relationships exist between body parts. The jealous spirit of my artistic discoveries also inflicts pain on me in various parts of my body and subjects me to its spiteful power.

PSYCHIATRIST – And what do you do to counteract the harassment of the spirit?

MESSERSCHMIDT – I'm trying to gain its control, so that the spirit can no longer control me. (*Satanic laughter*) I've devised a strange method. The cure for the demon's jealousy is to pinch myself in the side and grimace in front of a mirror.

PSYCHIATRIST – Is it from demonic persecution that your character traits are born?

MESSERSCHMIDT – You said it.

PSYCHIATRIST – So, to produce these works you look in the mirror, pinch your body and carefully observe the resulting facial expressions.

MESSERSCHMIDT – These faces, with their highly expressive and exasperated features, reproduce with great precision all the distortions of my face reflected in the mirror . Only in this way can I fight and exorcise the demons that persecute me .

PSYCHIATRIST – So you mean to say that your instincts make themselves felt in the symptomatic deformation of the faces and heads?

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, they reflect my impotence to control them; indeed, their sudden power over me threatens to overwhelm me.

PSYCHIATRIST – I understand. When you lost your place in society, you also lost face.

THERESE – You came from a humble background, but gradually rose to an important position in Vienna, inheriting the social status of nobles and intellectuals.

PSYCHIATRIST – It was truly humiliating for you to have to depend on them for artistic commissions. You had to curry favor with them, with absolute submission. You lived in a world where you had to bow and scrape to get ahead.

MESSERSCHMIDT – My hidden instincts threatened to explode, and the tightly closed lips and mouths of my characters' heads reflect my desperate attempt to contain them and the difficulty of doing so.

PSYCHIATRIST – The mouths of your heads are sometimes open, especially in your laughing self-portrait.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, the teeth are clearly visible, but they suggest a latent hostility. (*Now completely insane*) Even animals show "red lips" when threatened. What you call "madness" was actually just a rude awakening, a revolt against the society that had first given me the reputation

of a successful artist and then taken it back, when my best days were behind me and I was no longer needed.

PSYCHIATRIST - But you had the strength to refuse a reward, even though your madness has changed your character.

MESSERSCHMIDT – Only when I lost the face I wore in Viennese high society, when I was stripped of my social mask, did I rediscover my true self. Only when my star fell did I become a true artist.

PSYCHIATRIST – And you've sculpted your crazy face. Your " koepfe " all represent the same bald skull of a middle-aged man; they're essentially a self-portrait.

THERESE - It's clear, the model is always the same: you, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt .

MESSERSCHMIDT – Yes, my demons are now my muses, and I've drawn the most creative inspiration from them by portraying them. I had to, because they never disappear from my mirror. They hide like jack-in-the-box toys, but they're ready to emerge when needed. Their faces are constantly changing, but they all look into my eyes, fascinated by my madness.

PSYCHIATRIST – Now I understand: you have drawn joy and consolation from your madness, the satisfaction that had been denied you during your painful ascent to the social heights of art.

MESSERSCHMIDT – *(screams)* Yes, the pleasure of life that I lost when I aspired to become a great artist and be recognized as such by society.

PSYCHIATRIST - The pleasure that your ambition had deprived you of.

MESSERSCHMIDT – A pleasure that ultimately became the strange relief of madness, because I want to make faces at myself and in these heads I see only myself. *(Exhausted and staggering Messerschmidt pinches himself severely until he collapses to the ground.)*

PSYCHIATRIST – *(walks forward followed by Therese)* His busts express the emotional states he experienced. They are the projection of his discontent.

THERESE – Whatever the origin of his “character heads,” these bizarre works coincided with a progressive deterioration in his mental health, and art had become Messerschmidt ’s means of healing.

PSYCHIATRIST – His death occurred two years after my visit. It was hastened by the destructive effects of "disordered efforts and intellectual imbalances."

THERESE - She was 47 years old .

(Light only on Messerschmidt 's body and then darkness)

FC VOICE - Poor Messerschmidt, his beloved koefkes would have to wait nearly two centuries for proper recognition. They were only the subject of artistic and critical reevaluation starting in the early 20th century, and are now sought after by museums around the world. They can be found in

the Louvre in New York, not to mention the Belvedere in Vienna—yes, the one by Klimt and many other artists of the Viennese Secession, which has about fifteen of his busts. And to think, two of his masterpieces, "The Sneeze" and "Man Gazing at the Sun," are also on display at Palazzo Coronini in Gorizia . These are the only two of his character portraits in a museum open to the public in Italy.

PROGRAM

At the time of his death in 1783, 69 heads were found in his artist's studio, some cast in a tin-lead alloy, some in alabaster.

They were inherited by his brother Johann Adam Messerschmidt who, after having sold some individual works separately, sold a set of forty-nine heads as a whole.

They were then exhibited in Vienna in 1793 at the Civic Hospital . On that occasion, a booklet was published in which **his heads, with their curious facial expressions,** defined for the first time as "character heads", were numbered and identified: "The Laughing Man", "The Yawning Man", "The Man Who Cries Like a Baby" or "The Man in a Bad Mood" are some of the titles with which we today identify **Messerschmidt 's works , but they are only false titles given after the fact.**

Initially they were presented as curious objects and put on display as a freak show at the Prater , Vienna's famous and very popular park , and later exhibited at fairs for the amusement of the public.

koepke " were later purchased by a certain Joseph Jüttner and exhibited again in Vienna in 1835, while in 1839 the newspaper *Der Adler* dedicated an article to them which was accompanied by a supplement illustrated with a lithographic image in which all forty-nine works are represented.

In 1889 the ensemble was dismembered and its bizarre heads were auctioned off separately: about ten were purchased by the urban planner Camillo Sitte as teaching material for the Staatsgewerbeschule , the State School of Applied Arts, of which he was director.

Emil 's collection Zuckerkandl and his wife Berta, whose salon was later frequented by some of the protagonists of the Viennese Secession, such as the painter Gustav Klimt and the architect Josef Hoffmann .

Many heads, or " koepfe ," as the sculptor liked to call them, were later lost. Only 44 have been traced to date, preserved in museums and public collections.

Coronini collections , currently the only ones owned by an Italian museum , were not included in this group because they had probably previously been sold by Messerschmidt 's brother , who added the initials "FM Sch ." and perhaps also performed some cold finishing. Unlike the other works in the series, which are able to stand independently on a base directly incorporated into the bust, the Gorizia ones, following a subsequent remodeling, instead rest on a wooden support, inserted into an alabaster pedestal.

Identified by scholars as *Variant of the greatest simplicity of spirit* and *Variant of an intense odor* , with reference to the titles of two very similar works included in the group of those exhibited in 1793, the two Gorizia heads had instead been called by Guglielmo Coronini the *Sneeze* and the *Man looking at the sun* .

It was the Count himself who purchased them in 1937 from Princess Eleonora Palffy Daun , his father Charles's cousin, for 2,000 shillings. However, it was not until 1940 that they were imported to Italy and then transferred, along with the family's other possessions, to Venice for the duration of the Second World War.

END