



Fig. 4 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *The Noble-Minded Man* (cf. cat. 32)



Fig. 5 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *The Yawner* (cf. cat. 16)

The heads "conformable with nature"

The "simple heads conformable with nature" (e.g. fig. 4) were undoubtedly the earliest in the series of "character heads." Given the remarks above, this means that we may date them between 1770 and 1775. This would accord with Fuessli's statements, and with the fact that Nicolai (1781) described them as admirable masterpieces fashioned "with great accuracy and verity." Wurzbach (1867), who acclaimed them as psychological and anatomical studies⁹ representing "objects" no sculptor had ever displayed before, expressly mentioned *The Yawner* (fig. 5) in this connection.

Also highly consistent with the above is the report of Messerschmidt's early interest in the "anatomical chamber" in the Munich home of his uncle Johann Baptist Straub (1704–1784), where he had closely studied anatomical figures and atlases in equal measure. In the same context, Wurzbach went so far as to describe him as the "Hogarth of sculpture."¹⁰ Given his aggressive personality, this assertion cannot be dismissed out of hand, although it was certainly not his aim to draw attention to deplorable social conditions as William Hogarth (1697–1764) did, for instance in his accusatory *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* series. The element that predominates in the early heads is mechanical and correct: viewed in the searching mirror, the face becomes the focus of the entire person.

By describing this group of works neutrally as "portraits" or "head-pieces," as he always did, Messerschmidt paved the way for purely conjectural interpretations such as those in the *Merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte* (1794). Johann Friedel (1783) referred to them soon after the artist's death as "Egyptian heads"¹¹—not least on the ground of purely external analogies: the headgear of *A Grievously Wounded Man* (cat. 29) lends him a certain resemblance to the Egyptian pharaohs—for instance to the death mask of Tutankhamun (Egyptian Museum, Cairo). Furthermore, Vienna's freemasons under Ignaz von Born (1742–1791), grand master of the "Zur wahren Eintracht" [True Concord] lodge, had taken an interest in ancient Egyptian cults, and Messerschmidt, through his friendship with freemasons and men of the Enlightenment (including Friedrich Nicolai and Franz Anton Mesmer, founder of the "Harmonische Gesellschaften" [an organization of the masonic type]), had gotten to know of Thot, the Egyptian moon god.¹²

The titles in the *Merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte*, trivial as they sometimes seem, remain valid to this day (and will probably be retained for want of any more apt designations). Unfortunately, they tend to obscure content rather than disclose it—a process assisted by the artist's deliberate attempts to mystify. Hevesi asserted that the relationship between a subject's head and limbs was the bane of Messerschmidt's life.¹³ Ernst Kris (1932)¹⁴ was no clearer in this respect when he stated that the "character heads" were not always open to interpretation, or that their meaning reposed "in their form itself."¹⁵ This view was specific to the "Viennese school of art history," which, ranging from Ernst Kris to Otto Pächt and beyond, argued in terms of form and excluded the "private meaning" or actual message from consideration. Messerschmidt, for his part, had no intention of revealing his true fears and tribulations to the beholder: on the contrary, they were his closely guarded secret.

In addition to *The Yawner* (fig. 5, cat. 16), which may be construed as an anatomical model, and the self-portrait *The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing* (cat. 13; see also fig.

9 Wurzbach 1867, p. 442.

10 Ibid.

11 Friedel 1783, p. 449.

12 Krapf 1995, p. 44 ff.

13 Hevesi 1909, p. 3.

14 Kris 1932, p. 191.

15 Cited from Gorsen 1997, p. 59.