

ANTON RAPHAEL MENGES

Aussig, 1728 – Rome, 1779

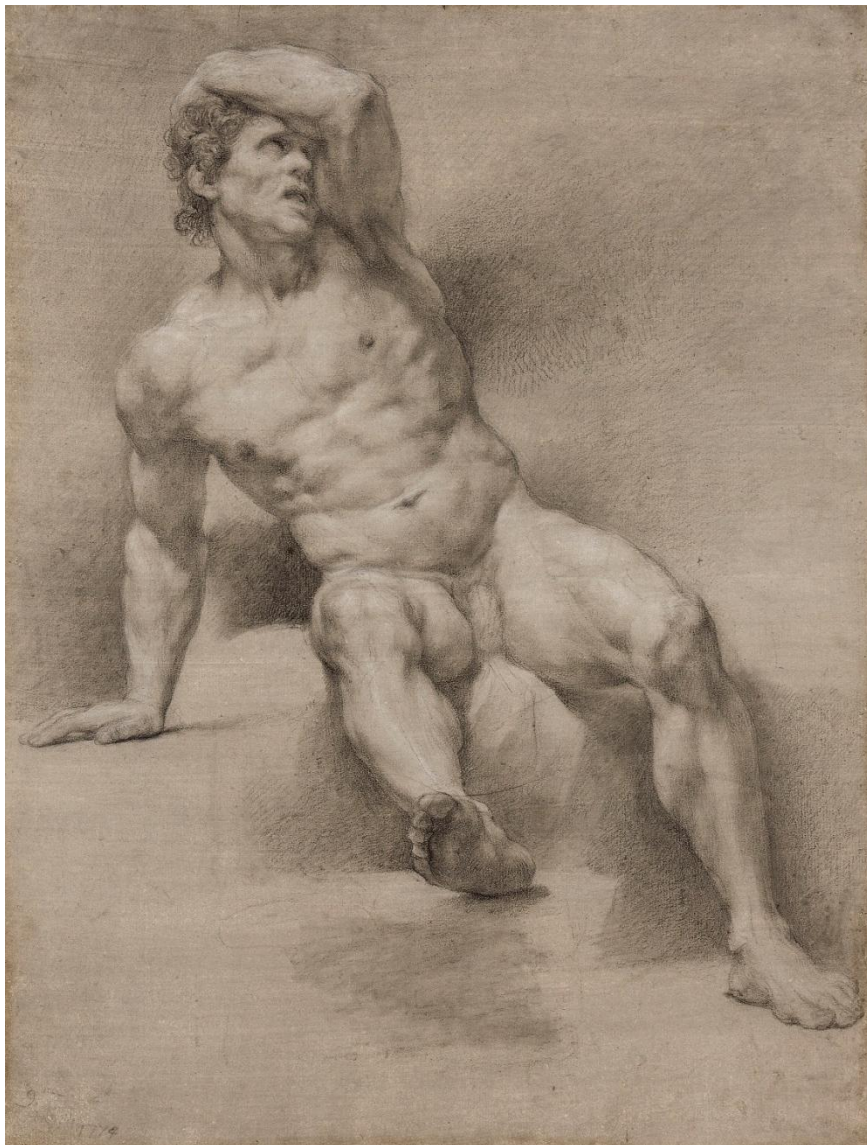
Study of male nude

1774

Black pencil, charcoal and white chalk highlights on laid paper, prepared with grey base.

520 x 393 mm

Inscriptions and marks: "9 / [sic illegible] 1774", lower left corner.



Anton Raphael Mengs was the most outstanding painter and treatise-writer; he was the best considered and most influential artist during the first neoclassic period. Born in Aussig (Bohemia) in 1728, he started his artistic training in Dresden under the supervision of his father Ismael Mengs, painter in the service of the Saxony court. In 1741 he travelled for the first time to Rome together with his family in order to complete his training. There he would have the opportunity to study classic antiquity and the works of Michelangelo and Rafael in the Vatican. Likewise, he would attend drawing lessons taught by Marco Benefial on the study of the nude figure.

In 1744 he returned to Dresden, where he mainly concentrated on the portrait genre. His exceptional talents for this genre led him to be named, only a year later, painter of the court of the Elector of Saxony, Federico Augusto. From that point on he would alternate sojourns between Dresden and Rome, his style evolving ever closer to that of Rafael. In 1751 and after having attained the post of First Painter of the court of Saxony, he would settle definitively in Rome, after having lived for a time in Venice and Florence. A year later, he was inducted in the Academia de San Lucas in 1755 and started a fruitful friendship with the neoclassical theorist Johann Joaquim Winckelmann. As a result of this relationship, in 1762 he published his aesthetic ideology *Gedanken über die Schönheit und über den Geschmack in der Malerey*. A good part of the main ideas contained therein would be disseminated and translated to other languages by his great friends Nicolás de Azara and Antonio Ponz.

His relationship with the Bourbons had started in 1759, when the Saxony court had ordered he move to Naples. There he met Carlos III just prior to his departure to Madrid as the new Spanish monarch. Eventually, Mengs would be called by the monarch to Spain in 1761 in order to carry

out the fresco decorations of the Royal Palace of Madrid. Furthermore, and in his capacity as First Court Painter, he would be commissioned to paint the portrait of the royal family. The influence of his style and his artistic theories would be fundamental in the future of Spanish art of the time. He trained and worked together with Francisco Bayeu, Francisco de Goya and Mariano Salvador Maella; this last artist is also represented in this catalogue. During the almost twelve years that Mengs was in Spain – from 1761 to 1769 and from 1774 to 1776 – he was the mirror in which the other painters had to contemplate themselves, especially due to the fact that Mengs prepared a study plan for the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. In 1776 he was given permission by the King to return to Rome, where he would die three years later after having achieved enormous fame. It is not by chance that his first bibliography was



Fig. 1. Domenico Cunego, *Self-portrait of Anton Raphael Mengs*, included in the work by Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, *Epilogo della vita del fu Cavalier Antonio Raffaello Mengs...*, Geneva, 1779.

published that same year by Carlo Giuseppe Ratti (Fig. 1).¹

This fantastic drawing, which was made known in 2003 by Artur Ramon Art, exemplifies to perfection the neoclassical tenets of Mengs. It concerns a *Study of male nude* masterfully executed in black pencil, charcoal and white heightening on laid paper previously prepared with a grey base tone. In the lower left corner can be found some traces of an inscription which surely alluded to a concrete date, although now only the numbers of the year can be read clearly, 1774. Keeping this in mind, the drawing could have been done either in Florence, where he was staying from January until April; or in Madrid, where he returned in July of that same year.

Regarding our drawing, we have already emphasized the evident relationship with classical statuary.² In effect, as conceived by Winckelmann and Mengs himself, there was only one valid way to approach art, and that was no other than by imitation of antiquity. Following Platonic theories, both considered that beauty was obtained through the intellectual reconstruction of nature, selecting only the noblest elements of the same. Through this process, the Greek and Roman sculptors had attained perfection, and so their statues were transformed into models to imitate, either from the original marble or via plaster casts of the same.³ On this point it is worth remembering how the study plan of the Academy of San Fernando determined the work of the students first in the “plaster room”, where they drew from plaster cast models, and how later they progressed to draw in the “live model room”. Mengs himself put a lot of effort into obtaining plaster cast models for the Academy in

Madrid between 1763 and 1769, as well as for his own collection, which he had started some years previously in Rome and which he had left in the care of his disciple, the painter Raimondo Ghelli from Ferrara, and his brother-in-law and also painter, Anton von Maron. These efforts were not in vain; the Bohemian artist had plans to create an Academy, of which he would be Director, in the Eternal City for the Spanish students studying abroad.

It was precisely during his stay in Florence in 1774 that Mengs must have attended to a large extent to his collection of plaster cast statues. There he had obtained permission from the Dukes of Tuscany – keep in mind that the Duchess, María Luisa de Borbón was a daughter of Carlos III – to copy much of the statuary of the Royal Gallery (Galleria Reale) and the collection of the Grand Dukes.⁴ Hence it is in this precise context in which our drawing is framed. The fact that it is incomplete in some parts, such as the feet or the right hand, corroborate that it could have been executed in Florence. Another factor in favor of this hypothesis is the evident similarity, not only of style but also in formal aspects, which exists with a series of drawings by the Bohemian artist preserved in the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt and in the Accademia di Brera of Milan (Fig. 2).⁵ Indeed, the Darmstadt drawings, as clearly seen by the Mengs specialist Steffi Roettgen, reproduce in good measure

¹ For a more complete biography on Mengs, see, among others: Ratti, 1779; Ceán Bermúdez, 180, Vol. III, pp. 120-133; Roettgen, 1999, and Roettgen, 2008, pp. 75-79.

² *Raíz del Arte V*, 2003, pp. 29-30.

³ On this theme, we direct attention to the text of Negrete Plano, 2008, pp. 81-85.

⁴ See Beattini, 1991, and Negrete Plano, 2008, p. 84.

⁵ See respectively *Mengs*, 2001, n° cats. 67-70 and *Goya e Italia*, 2008, Vol. I, p. 78, n° cat. 123.

some of the sculptures that were located at the Galleria Reale at that time and which today form part of the Galleria degli Uffizi.⁶ The Milan drawing seems at mid-point, like our drawing, between the genre of *academia* strictly speaking – which is to say, the study of the nude – and the copy of the marble statues and the plaster cast copies.

As regards our drawing, there are similarities between it and such celebrated works as *Belvedere Torso* by Apolonio de Atenas, the *Laocoön* or the *Fauno Barberini*. Together with this, however, I believe it is also possible to consider, due to the position of the figure and the excellent anatomical analysis, as well as the expression of the face, the pose of a model who would be imitating the stance of a Greco-Roman statue. If this were the case, we could consider that our drawing may have been done in Rome or even Madrid from July 1774 onwards. Be that as it may, what are evident in this drawing are the neoclassical tenets of the ideal reconstruction of nature parting from the study of classical antiquity which we have commented previously.

Ángel Rodríguez Rebollo



Fig. 2. Anton Raphael Mengs, *Nude seated in pose of cyclops*, 1771-1773. Black pencil, charcoal and white lead highlights on laid paper, 450 x 397 mm. Milan, Accademia di Brera, Gabinetto dei Disegni.

⁶ See for example the drawings of the group *Fighters* (*Luchadores*) or the *Study of the seated male nude* (*Estudio de desnudo masculino sentado*)

analyzed by Roettgen, 1999, Vol. I, p. 428 and 429 respectively.