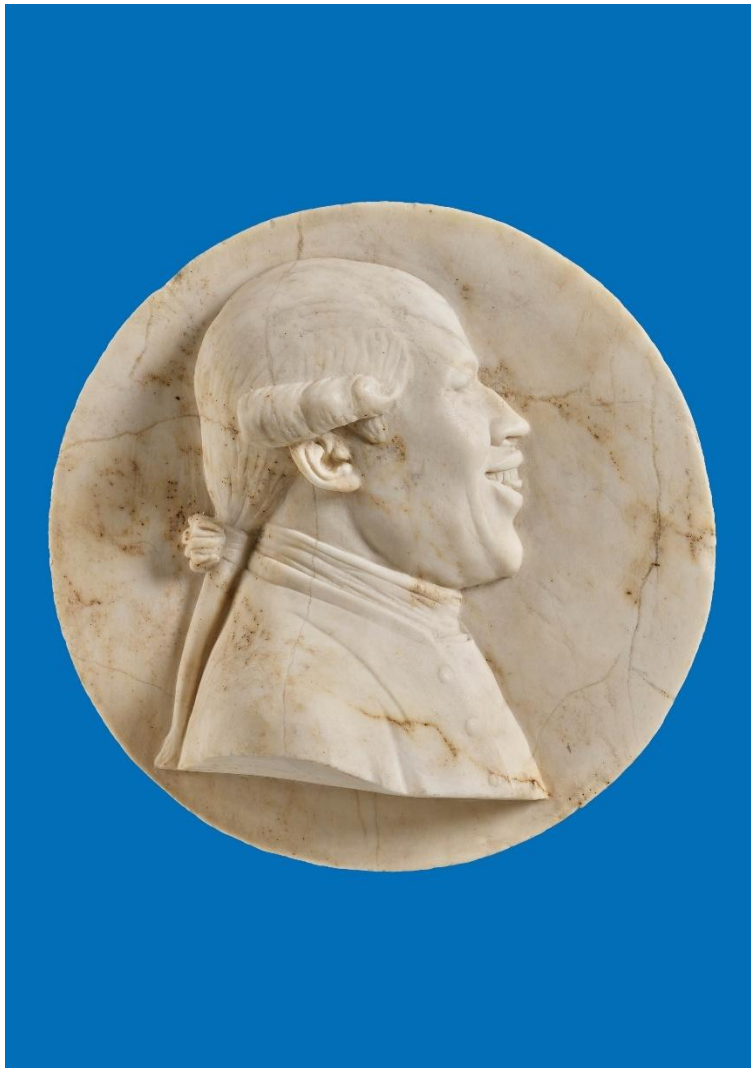


FRANZ XAVER MESSERSCHMIDT MORE THAN CHARACTER HEADS

Lower Belvedere
31 October 2025 to 6 April 2026



Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *Self-Portrait, Laughing*, um 1777–83
Szépművészeti Múzeum / Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

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Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783) is presented as an artist at a cultural and political turning point in history. His portraits of members of the court and the aristocracy, scholars, scientists, and writers offer an insight into the social structures of his day. Furthermore, his now iconic "*Character Heads*," which he started working on in 1770, are also interpreted as a phenomenon of their time. The exhibition compares Messerschmidt's sculptures to the work of other artists with whom he has often been associated with the aim of critically questioning possible parallels and influences.

General Director Stella Rollig: No other artist from the Belvedere's collection holds equal fascination for both the public and artists in the same way as Messerschmidt. Was he a genius or an outsider? Many identities have been attributed to him through history, some of which are pure fiction. This exhibition considers these various interpretations from today's perspective and shows the full scope of his work in a way that has not been seen for a long time.

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt is one of the pivotal artists in the Belvedere's collection. The museum holds the world's largest selection of works by this sculptor and has showcased these in its permanent displays for over a century.

From around 1769 Messerschmidt's portraits reflected a new image of humanity, permeated with the ideas of the Enlightenment, with emphasis moving away from Baroque pomp to place a greater focus on the individual. Moreover, the patrons and personalities he portrayed—such as Maria Theresia Felicitas von Savoy-Carignan, physicians Gerard van Swieten and Franz Anton Mesmer, and art writer Franz Christoph von Scheyb—shed light on the cultural, political, and intellectual world of the eighteenth century.

Although Messerschmidt's "*Character Heads*" are now famous, they remain a puzzle to this day. The psychopathological interpretation—extremely popular

since the twentieth century—is a narrow lens through which to view these objects and ignores the fact that the sculptor was responding to the profound social and intellectual changes of the eighteenth century in his work. The exhibition aims to situate Messerschmidt's *"Character Heads"* in the context of that period's preoccupation with facial expressions and to read them as a phenomenon of their time. Comparisons with works by artists such as Joseph Ducreux, William Hogarth, and Jakob Matthias Schmutzer confirm that the fascination with the face (and its aberrations) was by no means unique in this age.

Despite the fact that Messerschmidt's intentions remain unclear, we can identify key intellectual trends from the eighteenth century in his "Character Heads"—even now they still inspire direct responses from viewers. Their frontality and expressive power are classic examples of the departure from academic Neoclassicism, said curator Katharina Lovecky.

Curator Georg Lechner added: Messerschmidt's "Character Heads" have had an eventful exhibition history reflecting their varied reception—from amusing curiosity to important works of art history. After the Baroque Museum was opened in the Lower Belvedere, Messerschmidt's sculptures became established museum pieces and were permanently incorporated into art-historical debate.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. More Than Character Heads

Sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt lived and worked during a period of cultural and political upheaval and transition. His portraits reflect the shift toward the ideals of the Enlightenment during the 18th century with emphasis moving away from Baroque pomp to focus on the individual. The spotlight was now on a person's distinctive appearance rather than their status or role in society. At the same time, however, new norms and ideals to measure and categorize human characteristics and emotions were developing in science, medicine, and art.

In the 1770s Messerschmidt started working without commission on his now iconic "*Character Heads*," a series of busts he named simply *Kopfstücke* (Head Pieces). In these, Messerschmidt transformed facial expressions into exaggerated grimaces. Even today it is not clear what these puzzling objects are trying to convey. The Belvedere has the largest collection of "*Character Heads*"—16 in total, 8 of which are presented in this exhibition.

More Than Character Heads places the series in the context of the artistic trends of the time and showcases works from every stage of the sculptor's career. By considering Messerschmidt's clientele and models in Vienna and Pressburg (now Bratislava), we gain an impression of the Enlightenment circles in which the sculptor moved. The exhibition also challenges myths about Messerschmidt, offering fresh perspectives on the artist and his work.

Early Successes

At the very start of his career, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt was awarded a prestigious job: Prince Joseph Wenzel I of Liechtenstein entrusted a commission for busts of the imperial couple to the up-and-coming sculptor. This was to show his gratitude to Maria Theresa after she had commissioned a bust of the prince from sculptor Balthasar Ferdinand Moll as a tribute to Liechtenstein's services as a field marshal.

Messerschmidt's bronze portraits of the monarch and her consort, Francis Stephen I, appear both dignified and full of life. They were placed on display, together with Moll's bust of the prince, in the Emperor's Hall of the Imperial-Royal

Armory, as historical watercolors document. These stores for the imperial weapons' collection in the center of Vienna were demolished in the 1860s.

In addition to the ruler Maria Theresa, Duchess Maria Theresia Felicitas von Savoy-Carignan was one of the most important female patrons of the arts in 18th-century Vienna. She supported Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, commissioning him to rework marble sculptures in her family chapel at Saint Stephen's Cathedral in 1768. The sculptor also created a statue of Mary for the façade of her city palace—later the Savoy Foundation for Noble Ladies—and a group of tin figures for its courtyard fountain. These works reflect Messerschmidt's ability to precisely tailor material and execution to his subject.

Portraits Unadorned

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's portraits reflect changes in art and society in the Enlightenment. During the 18th century, the portrait bust grew in popularity. Busts were no longer made exclusively for the aristocracy but also for the bourgeoisie, a reflection of the growing self-confidence among the middle classes. The focus shifted from representing an individual's achievements and roles in society to depicting their distinctive physical appearance.

The people portrayed by Messerschmidt also provide insights into the ideas being discussed at the time. Examples include his busts of writer Franz Christoph von Scheyb and physician Gerard van Swieten.

Miniatures in Alabaster

In addition to his portrait busts in stone and metal, around 1780 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt made a number of small alabaster medallions. A variety of gypsum, alabaster resembles marble but is softer, making it easier to sculpt. Most of Messerschmidt's miniature profile portraits were commissions, for both noble and bourgeois clients. But he also made and sold medallions that had not been commissioned. Hungarian hydraulic engineer Joseph Kiss, for example, acquired six further miniatures in addition to his own alabaster portrait.

Some medallions reveal similarities with the series of "*Character Heads*" that Messerschmidt was working on at the same time.

New Beginnings

In 1769 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt was appointed substitute professor to support his former teacher Jakob Schletterer at the academy in Vienna. He was also given clear indication that he would succeed Schletterer as professor of sculpture. However, when Schletterer died in 1774, Messerschmidt was passed over, his apparent hostility to colleagues and "mental confusion" cited as reasons for not choosing him.

Messerschmidt turned his back on Vienna in disappointment. After spending some time in Wiesensteig and in Munich, he finally settled in Pressburg/Bratislava in 1777. During this phase, the sculptor made his living from the sale of small alabaster medallions and portrait bust commissions. At the same time, and without working on commission, Messerschmidt dedicated himself more intensively to his series of "*Character Heads*."

Head Pieces

Around 1771 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt started working on his "*Character Heads*"—a title that has been used for this series of at least 55 objects only since 1805. The sculptor himself called these still puzzling works simply *Kopfstücke* (Head Pieces). The heads capture a wide variety of facial expressions and were probably based on Messerschmidt's own face. They remained in the sculptor's possession until his death.

The two *Head Pieces* shown here with short hair and no pupils recall Neoclassical portraits inspired by ancient Roman sculptures. Unlike Messerschmidt's heads, however, such works do not depict fleeting emotions and states. It is this that distinguishes the "*Character Heads*" with furrowed brows from Neoclassical portraits.

Similarities and Differences

How can Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's "*Character Heads*" be understood in the context of intellectual and artistic developments in the 18th century?

In the academies across Europe, published typologies of expressions were used to teach the representation of emotions according to the Neoclassical ideal.

However, the aim was always to exercise restraint and avoid exaggeration in their representations of emotional states.

British painter and engraver William Hogarth, with whom Messerschmidt was compared early on, used facial expressions to inject life into his socially critical visual stories. Furthermore, Messerschmidt's acquaintance with controversial physician Franz Anton Mesmer may also have influenced the creation of the "*Character Heads*."

Myths About Messerschmidt

"We should not overlook the fact that many [...] accounts need to be treated with great caution, because a whole web of anecdotes and myths gradually formed around this mysterious personality, particularly after his death." Albert Ilg, 1885

The challenges faced by art historian Albert Ilg in his 1885 biography of Messerschmidt are similar to those confronting us in the 21st century. Attitudes to the artist's works are still influenced by narratives that describe the sculptor variously as a "genius," an "eccentric" loner, or a "seer of spirits." There are even dubious studies of Messerschmidt's art that claim to be able to draw conclusions about his mental state.

Which of these assessments are helpful to current research, and which anecdotes turn out to be myths?

More Than Character Heads

The term "*Character Heads*" suggests that Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's series is somehow connected with 18th-century pseudoscientific theories such as those of Swiss pastor and physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater, who sought to deduce human characteristics from facial expressions.

Messerschmidt's *Head Pieces* are not character studies, however, and should be seen in the context of the art of his time. The frontal perspective, the absence of pupils, and the bust format found in classical sculptures are typical Neoclassical stylistic devices. But rather than showing emotions as advocated in standard teaching aids, he depicted faces in extreme states. Like the painter Joseph

Ducreux sometime later, Messerschmitt is perhaps using humor to confront the strict Neoclassical ideal.

Understanding and Misunderstanding Messerschmidt

After Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's death, his brother Johann sold 49 "*Character Heads*" to the restaurateur and farmer Franz Strunz, who organized a first sales exhibition in Vienna in 1793. In an accompanying publication, he numbered the *Head Pieces* at random and gave them misleading titles. As a result, Messerschmidt's sculptures were presented for decades as curiosities.

It was the Vienna modernists who rediscovered Messerschmidt as a serious artist. The sculptor's works have been shown at the Belvedere and international exhibitions since 1923. The Belvedere now owns the largest collection of Messerschmidt's "*Character Heads*," some of which can be seen in the permanent exhibition.

In his travelogue published in 1785, Berlin man of letters Friedrich Nicolai wrote about a claimed visit to Messerschmidt's studio in Pressburg/Bratislava. He described the sculptor as a genius who had never studied at an academy. At the same time, he criticized Messerschmidt's supposed belief in extrasensory phenomena—in line with his Enlightenment mission of using the publication to warn against irrational tendencies in religion, art, and culture. Despite inconsistencies in content, the text was regarded and frequently quoted as an eyewitness account until well into the 21st century.

BIOGRAPHY FRANZ XAVER MESSERSCHMIDT

1736

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt is born on February 6 in the southern German town of Wiesensteig, son of tanner Johann Messerschmidt and his wife, Johanna, née Straub.

1746

After his father's death, the family moves to Munich, where Messerschmidt begins an apprenticeship as a sculptor with his uncle, Johann Baptist Straub.

c. 1752

Now a journeyman sculptor, Messerschmidt moves to Graz, where he works in the studio of another uncle, Philipp Jakob Straub.

1755

Begins studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna under professors Jakob Schletterer and Balthasar Ferdinand Moll.

c. 1760

First major commissions establish Messerschmidt's career as a sculptor in Vienna.

1764–66

Monarch Maria Theresa commissions two large portrait busts of herself and her consort, Emperor Francis Stephen I.

1765

Study trip to Rome, where Messerschmidt stays for several months and expands his knowledge of classical art.

1768–70

Commissions for Duchess Maria Theresia Felicitas von Savoy-Carignan.

1769

Messerschmidt is accepted as a member of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and appointed substitute professor to Jakob Schletterer.

1770

Purchase of a house at Ungargasse 5 (no longer standing).

c. 1771

Financial difficulties. Messerschmidt starts working on the "*Character Heads*."

1774

Sale of the house on Ungargasse. After the death of Jakob Schletterer, Messerschmidt is passed over at the election for the next professor, despite having been promised the post in writing.

1775–77

Messerschmidt leaves Vienna and stays in Munich, then Wiesensteig,

before returning to Munich for a longer period.

1777

Move to Pressburg/Bratislava, the capital of Hungary at the time, where Messerschmidt lives with his brother. Continues his work on the "*Character Heads*" and makes portrait medallions and busts.

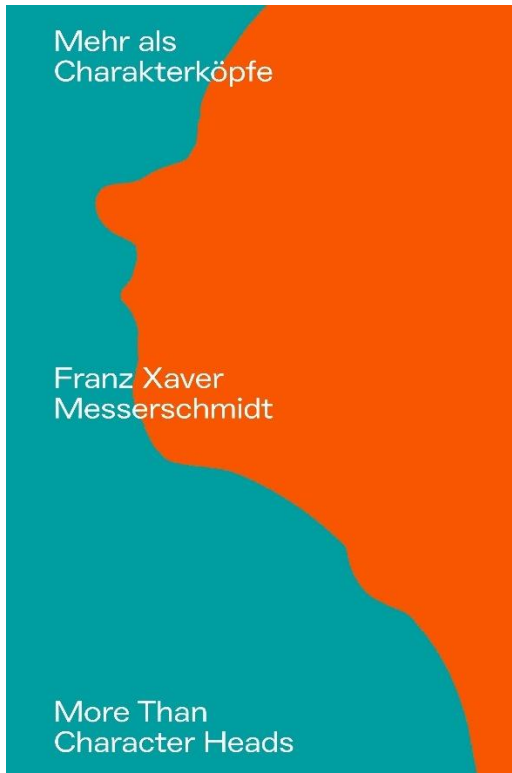
1780

Purchase of a house in a suburb of Pressburg/Bratislava.

1783

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt dies on August 19 after a brief illness.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. More Than Character Heads

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MESSERSCHMIDT AT THE UPPER BELVEDERE

In addition to the exhibition in the Lower Belvedere, the following works by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt are on display in the collection presentation *Picture this!* in the Upper Belvedere:

"Character Head" Nr. 34, 1770/1783

"Character Head" Nr. 11, 1771/1783

"Character Head" Nr. 32, 1777/1783 (?)

"Character Head" Nr. 22, 1771/1775

"Character Head" Nr. 10, 1775/1777

"Character Head" Nr. 17, 1777/1783

"Character Head" Nr. 15, 1771/1783

"Character Head" Nr. 35, 1777/1783

The strong smell, 1777/1783

Smell that provokes sneezing, 1777/1783

Joseph II as Archduke, 1760/1763

Maria Isabella of Parma, 1760/1763

All works from the Belvedere collection can be viewed here with their current location: <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/people/1424/franz-xaver-messerschmidt/objects>

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition	Franz Xaver Messerschmidt More Than Character Heads
Curators Assistant Curator	Katharina Lovecky and Georg Lechner Kati Renner
Exhibition Design	Rober Rűf
Graphic Design for the exhibition	Larissa Cerny
Duration	31 October 2025 to 6 April 2026
Location	Lower Belvedere, Rennweg 6, 1030 Vienna
Opening Hours	Monday to Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm
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For more information on the exhibition and high-resolution press photos please visit www.belvedere.at/en/press