

Mengs, a second Raphael ...

‘All roads lead to Rome’ – this maxim was most certainly applicable to the eighteenth century, when those yearning to broaden their horizons as well as artists from all over Europe flocked to that city, attracted by its art treasures spanning every period from antiquity to the Baroque. It is also applicable to Anton Raphael Mengs, who was born in the city of Aussig on the banks of the Elbe (now Ústí nad Labem in present-day Czechia) on 12 March 1728 as the illegitimate son of the painter and miniaturist Ismael Mengs (1688–1764) and Christiana Charlotta Bornmannin (d. 1730/31).¹ Given such origins, one would scarcely have expected him to develop into one of the most notable painters of the interim phase between the Late Baroque and Neoclassicism, or that he was to be famous in his own lifetime. That the Eternal City would be the lodestar of his artistic career was, however, in a sense foretold at his birth, for Ismael named his son after Antonio Allegri, better known as Correggio, and after Raphael, who had been active principally in Rome. The elder Mengs had been able to admire works by both painters during a trip to Italy in 1718. This stern and ambitious man, who had been working for the Dresden court since 1714, accordingly directed his son’s attention southwards from an early age. In the autumn of 1740, Ismael set off for Rome together with Anton Raphael, who was barely twelve years old, and his two sisters, Theresa Concordia (1725–1806) and Julia Charlotte (c.1730/31–after 1806?). Among other educational goals, the three children, whom their father wanted to train as painters, were to be exposed there to the works of antiquity and the Renaissance. This stay in Rome, which lasted until December 1744, proved to be worth their while, for already in the following year all three of Ismael Mengs’s offspring were appointed *Kabinettmaler* (painters of cabinet pictures) at the Dresden court, which in those years was enjoying a notable cultural heyday. Even

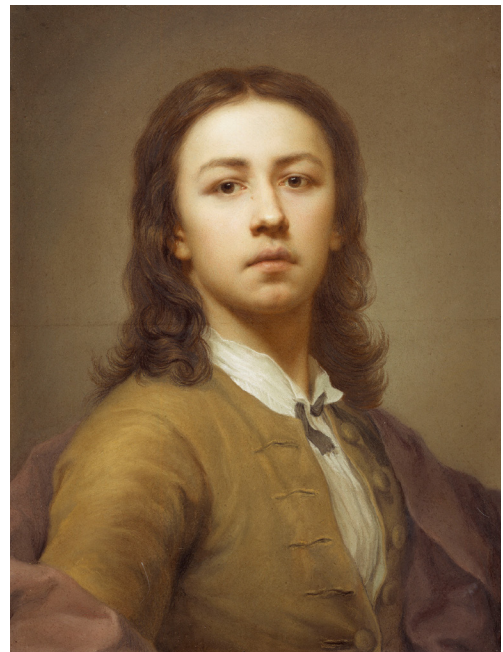


Fig. 1
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Self-Portrait in a Red Mantle*,
1744/45. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden,
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, inv. P 167

though Theresa Concordia would later settle permanently in Rome and even be admitted into the Accademia di San Luca, only her brother was to be granted a meteoric career that was bound up with the city and all that it had to offer. As early as 1746, Elector Friedrich August II of Saxony (who at the same time ruled over Poland as King August III) granted Ismael Mengs and his family the opportunity to undertake another trip to Rome, almost certainly because his son had already given proof of his exceptional talent as the author of some remarkable pastel portraits (*fig. 1*). This second stay in Rome was intended,



Fig. 2
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Electoral Crown Prince Friedrich Christian*, 1751. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 2023.100



Fig. 3
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Maria Antonia of Bavaria*, 1751. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, inv. 2163

among other things, to help the highly promising young court painter to extend and deepen his academic studies, which subsequently enabled him to excel in the field of history painting. Shortly before his return to Dresden in 1749, Anton Raphael Mengs converted to Catholicism and married Margareta Guazzi (1729–1778), a native of Rome. In 1751, he was appointed first painter to the Saxon-Polish court, but by 1752 he was already in Rome again in order to be able to work amid the creations of his artistic role models. Indeed, as a result of the catastrophic repercussions that the Seven Years War (1756–1763) had for Saxony, the city on the Tiber was henceforth to be his main place of residence. Mengs would never again return to Dresden, even though he continued to be officially employed by the court there. Apart from some sojourns in various other parts of Italy and two stays in Spain lasting several years each, during which he worked as court painter to King Charles III, Mengs remained closely associated with Rome, whose artistic marvels and intellectual circles offered an ideal environment for his development as an artist. In that regard, an

important influence was his friendship of many years with the eminent archaeologist and writer on art Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), a compatriot with whom Mengs shared a faith in the ideal beauty of the works of the ancient Greeks – a beauty they also saw as a reflection of moral purity – and in the exemplary status of those works for contemporary artists. When Winckelmann published his *History of the Art of Antiquity* in 1764, the book, now acknowledged to be a trailblazer in the fields of archaeology and art history, not only carried a dedication to Mengs but also contained a passage in which the author waxed lyrical about how the ideal beauty of ancient Greece had been reincarnated in his paintings:

‘The very embodiment of all of the beauties in the antique figures here described is to be found in the immortal works of Anton Raphael Mengs, first court painter to the kings of Spain and Poland, the greatest artist of his time, and perhaps of all time following. He is risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the first Raphael to teach the world the path to beauty in the arts.’²



Fig. 4
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Electeur Friedrich August III as a Child*, 1751.
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,
inv. P 176

... and his first portraits

Winckelmann was far from alone in hailing Mengs as a renewer of art, as a ‘second Raphael’. The painter, who had been admitted into the Accademia di San Luca as early as 1752, was himself also the author of several influential treatises, in which he advanced his aesthetic principles. However, soon after Mengs’s death in Rome in 1779, his historical and allegorical paintings, which from a modern vantage point make him one of the founding fathers of Neoclassicism, began to be decried as soulless and slick canvases in the academic mould. Most of Mengs’s portraits, though, were spared such condemnation. Alongside the numerous self-portraits, which he continued to paint until relatively late years (see *figs. 1, 8*), it is above all his early pastel portraits, which he created in the mid-1740s and in which he depicted relatives and friends of his as well as members of Saxony’s ruling house, that have continually won praise for their spirited and natural treatment of the subjects and for the artist’s virtuosic use of pastel crayons.³ These portraits, almost all of which are compact half-length pictures, made Mengs famous before he had even reached the age of twenty and were very soon accorded a place of honour in the Dresden collections by Friedrich August II. The young Anton Raphael and his two sisters clearly opted for pastel because the elector was very fond of the medium – he was, for example, to acquire dozens of works by Rosalba Carriera as well. In contrast, there are virtually no large-scale oil portraits by Mengs from that period,

which probably also has to do with the fact that his father Ismael, who worked mainly as an enamel painter and a miniaturist, had not been able to teach him much in the field of oil painting.⁴ Still, it is recorded that Ismael, who was himself a talented portraitist, had his son and pupil copy portraits by van Dyck for training purposes from an early age. That first stay in Rome, which immediately precedes the period during which Mengs painted his Dresden pastels, must have further enhanced the young artist’s powers of observation. Moreover, the famous *Self-Portrait in a Red Mantle* (see *fig. 1*), which belongs to that group, has a programmatic link to Rome: it is modelled on Paolo Naldini’s portrait bust of Raphael in the Pantheon and thus serves as an early illustration of the young painter’s veneration for his great Italian namesake.⁵

However, it was ultimately the second stay in Rome that equipped Mengs with what he needed to fully perform the tasks expected of a principal court painter, which, in addition to history painting – then considered the supreme genre – also included the execution of official



Fig. 5
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Pope Clement XIII*, 1758. Venice,
Ca’Rezzonico



Fig. 6
Anton Raphael Mengs, *King Ferdinand IV of Naples*, 1759/60. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, inv. 83814



Fig. 7
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Isabel Parreño y Arce, Marchioness of Llano* (replica), 1771/72. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. SK-A-3277

portraits of ruling princes and their families. With his full-length portrait of Friedrich August II (known only from a bozzetto) and the pendant portraits of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian and his wife Maria Antonia of Bavaria (figs. 2, 3), the young artist proved that he was more than capable of filling the void occasioned by the departure, in 1748, of Louis de Silvestre (1675–1760) from the employ of the Saxon court. Created around 1750, these works on the one hand belong to the tradition of the French High Baroque state portrait, to which de Silvestre had likewise been committed in his own day. On the other hand, by virtue of their sophisticated painterly effects and the realistic physiognomy, they go beyond the formulaic style of such *portraits d'apparat*. Similar qualities are also displayed by the pastel portrait of the future Elector Friedrich August III as a child (fig. 4), which Mengs painted in 1751, that is, the year of his appointment to the post of principal court painter.⁶ Just as remarkable as the naturalness of the gestures and facial expression of the infant shown resting on a cushion

is the ease with which the painter dealt with the task – a task inherent in such works – of including allusions to the subject's princely rank. In its masterly rendering of the various materials, too, this innovative portrait of a child anticipates the impressive series of likenesses of the Habsburg and Bourbon princes and princesses that Mengs was to produce in Italy many years later.

In Italy and Spain

Soon after his arrival in Rome in 1752, where he had initially hoped to complete his painting for the high altar of the Court Church in Dresden, Mengs gained a new customer base consisting of Grand Tour travellers, both nobles and commoners. He swiftly established himself, alongside Pompeo Girolamo Batoni (1708–1787), as one of the most sought-after portraitists for these visitors to Rome, who were mainly from England. The likenesses of his English clients are often informed by van Dyck's approach to portraiture, which was still the prevailing

one in the sitters' home country. However, in contrast to the works of his Italian rival, they are less representative and mostly therefore lacking in allusions to Rome as the place of their creation. Mengs's portrait of Cardinal Alberico Archinto in 1756 was the first time that a Roman Catholic prelate had sat for him; this was followed just two years later by a pair of remarkable portraits of the newly elected Pope Clement XIII (*fig. 5*).⁷ These two three-quarter-length portraits of the pontiff seated on his throne, which continue the tradition of Raphael's likeness of Pope Julius II, attest to the formidable reputation that Mengs had managed to earn in just a few years of working as a portraitist in Rome, which derived mainly from his gift for perceptive characterization and painterly brilliance.

A further important milestone in his career came in 1761, when Mengs took up the post of painter to the Spanish court in Madrid.⁸ It was but reluctantly that he accepted this prestigious appointment by King Charles III, for it meant above all having to leave Rome, where he had just completed what was an epoch-making work of Neoclassicism, his *Parnassus* fresco at the Villa Albani. The Bourbon monarch had chosen Mengs because, on the one hand, he wanted to bring a capable artist to Madrid for the decoration of the newly erected Royal Palace – a project that Mengs would undertake together with Corrado Giaquinto (1703–1766) and Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770) – and, on the other, he was keen to secure an outstanding portraitist for his court in Madrid. Already in 1755, Charles's wife, Maria Amalia of Saxony, who as a daughter of Elector Friedrich August II would have already heard of Mengs, had sought to commission him to paint portraits of the royal family. One of the first such works that he executed for Charles and Maria Amalia was a full-length portrait of their third son, King Ferdinand IV (*fig. 6*).⁹ It was painted by Mengs in 1759/60 during a stay in Naples, the occasion being the ascension of the prince, who was not yet of age, to the thrones of Naples and Sicily, which had been abdicated by his father in Ferdinand's favour upon becoming the king of Spain. This state portrait marked the start of a long series of likenesses of members of the Bourbon dynasty, most of which were painted in Madrid. In these works, of which numerous replicas were also produced in the painter's studio, Mengs often had to abide by the conventions of Spanish court portraiture, but he managed to bring a new freshness to the task at hand through the realistic rendering of his sitters' individual characteristics. He had greater leeway when working on commissions for clients outside the Madrid court, such as José Augustin de Llano, the Spanish ambassador at the court of Parma, who in 1770 arranged for Mengs to paint a portrait of his wife



Fig. 8
Anton Raphael Mengs, *Self-Portrait*, 1773. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. 1927 (inventory from 1890)

(*fig. 7*), which with its full-length female figure standing in an unmannered pose before a landscape clearly anticipates Goya.¹⁰ Mengs also made portraits in Italy, where he had been allowed to return in early 1770 for some much-needed rest. These were mainly likenesses of relatives of Charles III, starting with the grand-ducal family in Florence and then moving on, in 1772, to the royal family in Naples.¹¹ Particularly notable amongst this large group of works are the portraits of the children of the two ruling families, which were shipped to the Madrid and Viennese courts. In placing these orders, Charles III was seeking to give expression to the dynastic pride that he took in his descendants and, at the same time, to put on record the ties between the houses of Bourbon and Habsburg: his daughter Maria Luisa had married a son of Empress Maria Theresa, Peter Leopold, who became Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo I of Tuscany in 1765, while King Ferdinand IV of Naples (who was simultaneously King Ferdinand III of Sicily) had married Archduchess Maria Carolina in 1768. In these portraits of the still very young grandchildren of Charles III and Maria Theresa, Mengs was able to combine their identity as children with the aura of majesty. Amongst them is the work that is the subject of the present *Point of View* exhibition, the 1773 likeness of Princess Maria Teresa, the firstborn daughter of the King and Queen of Naples. With their spontaneity and painterly airiness, the portraits of this group stand in stark contrast to, say, the ceiling frescoes

in the Stanza dei Papiri in the Vatican, which Mengs also executed in those years. Following his return to Spain in 1774, Mengs, in addition to completing his frescoes in the Royal Palace, devoted himself above all to trying to improve local conditions for the training of artists. It was to that end that Mengs, who had been supportive of the young Goya, among others, donated his collection of plaster casts to King Charles in 1776. Plagued by chronic health problems, Mengs again received permission from his royal employer to return to Italy in the following year. However, the celebrated painter had only a few years left to live in his long-standing adoptive city of Rome. In these last years of his earthly span he continued to work on portrait commissions for the Spanish court while also painting some sober, psychologically penetrating likenesses of friends.

- 1 Two of the more recent seminal works on Mengs are: Steffi Roettgen, *Anton Raphael Mengs 1728 – 1779. Das malerische und zeichnerische Werk*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1999) and Steffi Roettgen (ed.), *Mengs – die Erfindung des Klassizismus*, exh. cat. Padua (Palazzo Zabarella) and Dresden (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen) 2001. The present essay is based on these two publications, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (Dresden, 1764), 184. Translation adapted from Thomas Pelzel, ‘Anton Raphael Mengs and His British Critics’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 15/3 (summer 1976), 405–21, see 410. See also Steffi Roettgen, ‘Winckelmann, Mengs und die deutsche Kunst’, in Thomas W. Gaehtgens (ed.), *Johann Joachim Winckelmann* (Hamburg, 1986), 161–78.
- 3 On Mengs’s self-portraits, see Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), ii, 398–403; Sibylle Ebert-Schifferer, ‘Mit dem Alter schreitet die Aufklärung fort. Chardin, Mengs und Graff im Selbstporträt’, in Hildegard Wiegel (ed.), *Italiensehnsucht: Kunsthistorische Aspekte eines Topos* (Munich 2004), 81–94, esp. 84–7.
- 4 An exception is a portrait of Friedrich August II dated to 1745 (Bayreuth, Neues Schloss), which echoes one by the Saxon court painter Louis de Silvestre. It is possible that Mengs, who was appointed *Kabinettmaler* in that same year, had been asked to demonstrate his technical proficiency in oil painting by making that copy. See Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cat. 148; exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), cat. 19.
- 5 See Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cat. 271; exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), cat. 2.
- 6 Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cat. 152.
- 7 Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cats. 192, 156, 158; exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), cats. 83, 85, 86.
- 8 On Mengs’s spells in Spain, see also José Luis Sancho and Javier Jordán de Urrés y de la Colina, ‘Mengs und Spanien’, in exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), 71–85; Pia Hollweg, *Anton Raphael Mengs’ Wirken in Spanien* (Frankfurt am Main et al., 2008).
- 9 Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cat. 134; exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), cat. 90.
- 10 Roettgen 1999 (see note 1), i, cat. 260; see also exh. cat. Padua and Dresden 2001 (see note 1), cat. 108 (replica in Amsterdam).
- 11 On the work that Mengs did in Florence, see also Matteo Ceriana and Steffi Roettgen (eds.), *I Nipoti del Re di Spagna. Anton Raphael Mengs a Palazzo Pitti*, exh. cat. Florence (Palazzo Pitti) 2017.